

Accept Rohingya boats stranded at sea

UN rights chief urges Bangladesh

AFP, Dhaka

A top UN official has urged Bangladesh to let two stranded boatloads of starving Rohingya Muslims land amid mounting fears over the fate of the refugees.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet warned of a “human tragedy of terrible proportions” unless action is taken to help the Rohingya.

The appeal was made to the Bangladesh government after Foreign Minister A.K. Abdul Momen said the South Asian country would not accept the boats.

His declaration last week set alarm bells ringing as it came only days after dozens of Rohingya died on a boat that waited at sea for two months before it could land.

The two new boats are believed to be in international waters hoping to get an opportunity to reach Malaysia. The Malaysian navy rebuffed one boat last week and has increased patrols as it expects increased attempts to smuggle people into the country.

The one million Rohingya in camps in Bangladesh, where they fled a military crackdown in their native Myanmar, favour going to Malaysia as it is Muslim majority country with more work opportunities.

“In a spirit of solidarity and at the beginning of the Holy Month of Ramadan, I appeal to you in the strongest terms to open your ports and allow the boats to land,” Bachelet

said in the letter, a copy of which was obtained copy by AFP.

“The reportedly more than 500 men, women and children aboard these boats have been at sea for an extended period of time, and we understand that they require urgent rescue, food, medical care and other necessary humanitarian assistance.”

Bachelet said “dangerous interception practices and collective expulsions, including pushing back boats that are trying to land, must be scrupulously avoided”.

The government did not immediately respond.

A coast guard spokesman said no boat had been spotted since the rescued of a trawler carrying 396 starving refugees on April 15. At least 60 people died on the boat.

Bangladesh vessels and helicopters have conducted a “huge search” in the Bay of Bengal over 10 days for the two new boats, Lieutenant Commander Hamidul Islam told AFP.

The foreign minister said last Thursday that the navy and coast guard had been ordered “not to let these boats enter Bangladesh”.

Thousands of refugees died in the Andaman Sea in 2015 on rickety fishing vessels that tried to reach Malaysia and Thailand.

Amnesty International says it believes there could be “at least three boats in the high seas” stranded for several weeks “without food and water, at high risk of death”.

Govt won’t allow

FROM PAGE 1

due to an inaccurate result, mingles with others, the virus will spread further, he said, adding, “Considering all these aspects, we are not allowing the test right now.”

He said the most reliable kit being used by all the countries for testing Covid-19 is RT-PCR (real-time reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction) that diagnoses the virus from samples collected from a person’s nose or throat where the virus can gather.

“We have a stock of more than one lakh RT-PCR kits. Its supply will be continuous. We also have extended testing to 25 facilities across the country. We will facilitate more centres for it. By next week, we can conduct more than 5,000 tests a day,” the official said.

He also rejected Gonoshasthaya Kendra Founder and Trustee Dr Zafrullah’s allegations that the Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA) and the health ministry were not being cooperative with Gonoshasthaya in the kit validation process.

“The way Dr Zafrullah blamed the DGDA and the health ministry is ill-motivated. In fact, Gonoshasthaya Kendra has not maintained protocol in the process. It didn’t have adequate preparation for the whole thing and is now putting the blame on us.”

Gonoshasthaya Kendra developed the test kit named Rapid Dot Blot, which it says can test for both antibody and antigen in five minutes and would be low-cost.

It organised a kit handover ceremony at the Gonoshasthaya Nagar Hospital on April 25 where the DGDA Director General Maj Gen Dr Mahbubur Rahman was invited. However, he did not attend.

On April 26, a team of Gonoshasthaya, led by Dr Mohibullah Khondoker, went to the DGDA, but its DG asked them to go through the CRO (contract research organisation).

At a press briefing on April 26 afternoon, Zafrullah alleged that the DGDA was displaying bureaucratic procedures and that there could be vested interests in that.

“They [DGDA] asked us to go through the CRO. We then requested them to write the names of the CROs but they did not,” he had told reporters. He suggested that it was better for the DGDA to accept the kits and get those validated under their own supervision.

“Instead, they asked us to go to the CROs,” Zafrullah said.

At yesterday’s press briefing, DGDA Director General Mahbubur Rahman

said he was surprised by the way Zafrullah blamed them.

He said all the way from the approval of importing reagents from abroad to inspecting Gonoshasthaya factory in Savar, the DGDA was fully cooperative and Gonoshasthaya even appreciated it in its letters.

“We did not go to the Gonoshasthaya’s kit handover ceremony because we said it was at the trial level and there was no need for it,” Mahbubur said.

Then, he continued, on April 26 when the Gonoshasthaya team of researchers went to his office, they had a cordial discussion and that the team was informed of the procedure, which requires them to go through a CRO and prepare a protocol for validation.

The protocol then has to be cleared by the Bangladesh Medical Research Council, and only then the application for validation along with the protocols should be submitted to the DGDA advisory committee for approval.

“The team then left with smile. But after half an hour, there was a press briefing by Gonoshasthaya, where they blamed us for non-cooperation,” the DG said.

Mahbubur also said they had earlier learned that the Gonoshasthaya kit was meant to test for the antibody, but over the last two to three days Gonoshasthaya is saying that the kit can also test for the antigen (virus).

“There was no proof yet anywhere in the world that the antigen could be found in blood,” he said. Nevertheless, he said, if the kit goes through proper trial and is found effective in the future, the DGDA will surely approve it.

About the combination of antibody and antigen test by Rapid Dot Blot test, Zafrullah said, “It was not rocket science. Our scientists have done it and found more than 90 percent accuracy.”

Restaurants

FROM PAGE 1

instead of 2:00pm from today.

The DMP expects that the city dwellers can purchase their daily essentials during the time by maintaining social distancing, said Masudur.

But there will be no change of timeframe for super shops and kitchen markets, and these will be open from 6:00am to 5:00pm daily, he said.

Medicine stores and emergency service providers will be outside the purview of the restrictions, he added.

A countrywide shutdown has been in force since March 26 to prevent the spread of novel coronavirus.

Hospital lab will begin from today.

“Besides, testing activities will be started at Chattogram University and in Dhaka University soon,” Prof Nasima Sultana informed.

DHAKA CITY WITNESS HIGHEST DEATHS

On March 18, the authorities reported the first death -- within the 11th-day of the first three positive cases being reported on March 8.

Of all deaths so far, Dhaka city witnessed the highest number of deaths -- 76, followed by Narayanganj with 39 deaths, according to the IEDCR website.

Besides, all upazilas and six affected districts out of 12 in Dhaka division have seen 13 deaths so far.

Of the other divisions, 10 deaths were reported in Chattogram division, four in Sylhet, one in Khulna, five in Mymensingh, two in Barishal and one in Rajshahi.

So far, Rangpur division, where 82 patients have been detected, have seen no deaths.



A mobile court led by Magistrate Md Touhidul Islam conducts a drive to regulate the price of ginger sold in Chattogram's Khatunganj yesterday. The mobile court fined one Shah Amanat Traders in this regard and instructed them to conduct sales at the proper price.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Doctors left unprotected

FROM PAGE 1

At least 373 doctors contracted the virus till yesterday. Of them, 84 were working at private hospitals, 179 at government hospitals and the rest at different specialised hospitals, according to the BDE.

“The main reasons behind the high rate of infection among doctors and other health workers in Bangladesh include the lack of PPE and supply of poor quality safety gear to them,” Nirupam Das, chief administrator of the foundation, told The Daily Star.

The spread of the virus at the community level, absence of triage system and patients’ tendency to conceal Covid-19 symptoms are also to blame, he said.

The triage system is used to determine which groups of patients should receive treatment and care services based on their clinical status.

Nirupam said although no private hospital formally treats Covid-19 patients, a good number of doctors at private hospitals contracted the virus, which prompted them to carry out the survey.

“We don’t know who’s carrying the virus. We have to treat whoever comes to us,” he said.

He urged the hospital authorities to ensure health safety for all doctors and requested the government authorities to monitor properly.

The BDF’s findings also raise questions about the efforts taken up by the health ministry and the health directorate to supply PPEs to doctors.

Although the lack of PPE is a global concern, health authorities in Bangladesh claim to have adequate PPEs in stock. During a videoconference yesterday, Prof Nasima Sultana, additional director general (administration) at Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), said the government so far collected 1,567,057 units of PPEs and distributed 1,291,098.

Some 275,959 PPEs are left in stock, she said.

Talking on the matter, an expert said handing enough PPEs to doctors was one crucial way to stop the spread of Covid-19 and keeping the physicians safe.

Schools may stay closed till Sept

FROM PAGE 1

waived and how much you can repay those regularly. You don’t need to be worried about it,” she said.

Hasina said the government would recruit an additional 2,000 doctors and 6,000 nurses soon for ensuring treatment of Covid-19 patients. The recruitment process has already started, she added.

“Special training on coronavirus treatment will be arranged for them [the new doctors and nurses]. They will provide services in this regard after receiving the training.”

The PM said the government would set up intensive care units (ICUs) in all districts.

“We will set up an ICU in a good hospital of every district. We have decided to do so in all districts in phases... we will provide special training on ICU operation,” she said.

Talking about a noble gesture from a “beggar”, Nazim Uddin of Jhinaigati village in Sherpur, Hasina said he has created a noble example for the whole world.

“We don’t see such a humane gesture from many rich people. They always express dissatisfaction,” she said.

Nazim Uddin donated Tk 10,000 from his savings for the helpless people during the Covid-19 shutdown.

The PM asked the people and local administrations to pay special attention to protecting dairy farmers, particularly in Sirajganj and Pabna, and distribute their milk as a relief item for children.

“Since you are providing relief materials, you can also give milk for children as relief,” she said, adding that she already asked the authorities to keep Milk Vita operative.

Hasina asked the authorities to make sure that foreigners, who recently returned to Bangladesh, were put on quarantine before they join their work at Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant in Pabna.

About transportation of goods, the PM said there is no restriction on this and she has directed the law enforcement agencies to cooperate in this regard.

“Without our doctors, this fight can never be won ... The safety of doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers have to be ensured first to contain the spread of the virus and save lives,” said Prof Muzaherul Huq, former adviser (Southeast Asia Region) of the World Health Organisation.

To ensure that, hospitals must be made germ-free, and quality PPEs, including masks that meet the N95 standard, must be provided to doctors and the other healthcare providers.

He said all doctors and healthcare workers at hospitals treating Covid-19 patients must be equipped with proper PPEs right away.

Besides, medical professionals working at non-Covid-19 hospitals but working at emergency wards or providing services to outdoor patients also must have proper PPEs, Prof Muzaherul Huq added.

The BDF survey also said some 62 percent of the doctors surveyed said they were receiving proper salaries while 12 percent said they got partial salaries. Twenty six percent said they haven’t got their salaries.

“We received allegations that many private hospitals were not giving full salaries to doctors. This survey proves those allegations to be true,” said Nirupam Das.

“We are requesting all hospital authorities to provide due salaries to the doctors in this crisis period,” he said.

A 2018 DGHS bulletin said the number of registered Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) doctors was 93,358 while 9,569 were registered as Bachelor of Dental Studies (BDS) in the country.

A total of 25,615 doctors are employed against 27,409 posts at different facilities under the DGHS, according to a March 2020 report.

Besides, around 75,000 doctors are working at different private facilities, a DGHS official said.

As his attention was drawn to the latest survey, Bangladesh Private Medical College Association President Mubin Khan said “almost all” doctors and other health workers at 69 medical colleges got PPEs and that they had available PPEs in stock.

She also said the government was thinking about creating more scopes for transporting goods easily. “We might open waterways gradually for transporting goods. In this way, the prices of goods will remain under control.”

The PM said the government was gradually relaxing restrictions in those areas less affected by the coronavirus. “We are paying attention to those areas so that people could lead a normal life and carry out their trade and business activities.”

Referring to agriculture, Hasina said Bangladesh’s land is fertile and emphasis should be put on making sure that there is no food scarcity in the country. “We have to make sure that not a single piece of land remains unutilised so that we can save our country from famine after the coronavirus pandemic.”

She also said the government has announced a stimulus package of Tk 5,000 crore to provide financial assistance to small and medium farmers in rural areas to boost agricultural production.

The PM said there would be no food crisis in the country if everybody worked unitedly. “That is why we have decided to procure 21 lakh tonnes of food grains.”

The government has allocated 95,000 tonnes of rice and about Tk 40 crore for distribution in 64 districts. The government has tasked 64 secretaries with the coordination of relief distribution, she added.

About stimulus packages, Hasina said the government has announced stimulus packages of Tk 1 lakh crore for all businesses, including small and medium ones, to overcome the impacts of Covid-19.

“The small businesses being affected in this situation can take loans at an interest rate of only 2 percent...we will look after them so that they could continue their businesses.”

She said there would be an economic recession worldwide due to Covid-19 and international organisations were apprehending a famine.

The PM said novel coronavirus was a global calamity and all the people

“It is not possible for me to tell about other private hospitals,” he told The Daily Star yesterday.

Asked whether doctors were being given full salaries, he said “almost all” private medical colleges provided full salary for March to doctors and other staffers.

However, the income of the medical colleges dropped significantly. So they might have to think “differently” regarding paying salaries to the staffers for “sustainability”, he said.

Replying to another question, he said three private medical colleges were almost ready to treat Covid-19 patients. “The authorities of several other private medical colleges were also working in this regard.”

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Medical Association yesterday said a total of 660 medical professionals had so far been infected with coronavirus, which is 11 percent of the total infected people in the country, according to a press release.

Of the 660, at least 295 are doctors, 116 nurses and 249 are other healthcare workers, it said.

The BMA demanded that all the healthcare workers at the hospitals dealing the Covid-19 patients be provided with standard PPE and N95 masks.

It also demanded the introduction of triage system at the non-Covid-19 hospitals and providing doctors, nurses and other medical staff working there with standard PPE and N95 masks.

PVT HOSPITAL INCLUSION

Prof Muzaherul Huq said engaging private hospitals in the fight against Covid-19 was very necessary since it was an emergency situation.

Upon talking to private hospitals authorities, the government can turn some of them into facilities to treat coronavirus patients, he said, adding that the government can borrow ICU beds, ventilators and some other equipment from private hospitals and supply those to these facilities.

The expert also said some private hospitals were relatively expensive. So, the government can subsidies them to provide Covid-19 patients treatment at a low price, he added.

He also said the government was thinking about creating more scopes for transporting goods easily.

She said darkness does not prevail forever and there will be light for sure. “We will start our journey again towards the path of light.”

Bangladesh Television, Bangladesh Betar and some private TV channels and radio stations broadcast the video conference live.

Earlier, the PM exchanged views with the public representatives and officials of 51 districts of Dhaka, Chattogram, Khulna, Sylhet, Barishal and Mymensingh divisions in five phases.

2 die

FROM PAGE 1

Barguna Civil Surgeon Dr Humayun Shaheen Khan said the family members should have admitted the man to a hospital after noticing Covid-19-like symptoms in him.

He said samples from the body were collected for coronavirus testing.

Later in the day, the deceased was buried at a graveyard in the town.

In Patuakhali, a union parishad member died with novel coronavirus-like symptoms at his home in Galachipa upazila’s Char Agostee village early yesterday.

The 65-year-old man, a member of Char Biswas Union under the same upazila, had been suffering from cold, fever and respiratory problems for a few days.

He said they came to know about the man’s death after his burial. The information came late as the man lived in a remote village which was isolated from the mainland.

Patuakhali Civil Surgeon Jahangir Alam said there were 22 Covid-19 patients in the districts until yesterday. Of them, five were undergoing treatment at an isolation unit in Patuakhali town.

A thousand protest demanding food aid

STAR REPORT

Nearly a thousand villagers in Dinajpur and Tangail yesterday blocked highways demanding food.

The protesters in both districts told reporters that they were going hungry and unemployed since the shutdown began on March 26.

Officials said they managed to provide the protesters with packs of relief goods in Tangail within hours, but it may take a couple of days for the goods to reach the villagers in Dinajpur.

About 700 people from Sadarpur and Darbarpur villages kept Dinaipur-Rangpur highway in Textile Mills area blocked for nearly five hours in Dinajpur town after 9:00am.

They left after the army, police and civil administration officers promised them supply of the relief goods as soon as possible.

Factories keep

FROM PAGE 1

Export Processing Zones Authority. Besides, there are 667 other garment factories that reopened yesterday.

At least 387 factories reopened in Dhaka, Savar and Ashulia, 527 in Gazipur, 519 in Chattogram, 225 in Narayanganj, 78 in Mymensingh and 84 in Khulna.

Ratna Akter, a worker at a factory in the capital’s Mirpur, said about half the workers had joined and all of them were wearing masks. They were also asked to wash hands before entering and at every one-hour interval.

She and many other workers from different factories said there were arrangements for washing hands at the entrances, they sat maintaining social distance and officials checked whether they had symptoms of coronavirus infection.

However, many workers from different factories in Savar, Ashulia, and Mirpur said the health safety measures were inadequate and barely anything had changed in the way they worked.

Workers of a group of garment companies in Ashulia’s Norshinghopur area refused to work during the coronavirus crises.

ON HIGHWAYS ON FOOT
Scores of workers were seen walking on the highways.

Social distancing, which is crucial in preventing the spread of coronavirus, was not maintained. Many jammed into pickups and trucks or hitchhiked their way into the factories amid the travel restrictions.

Many had their children with them. The factories should have arranged transport for them, labour leaders said.

Workers of Sharmin Group demanded one work-shift instead of two, said Ismail Hossain, managing director of the group.

Some of them damaged equipment and in the evening, they agreed to work two shifts, he said.

Ismail said two shifts would ensure social distancing among the factory’s 7,000 workers.

Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers & Exporters Association Vice-president Mohammad Hatem said member factories were asked to reopen the knitting and dyeing sections.

“BKMEA member factories have been opened on a limited scale after consultation with the government,” he said.

“The factories have taken precautions.”

In Chattogram, many factories have not been maintaining the coronavirus restrictions, workers said.

About 1.5 lakh workers of these factories have joined work since Sunday, they added.

They also had to walk for hours to reach Chattogram.

EXPERTS HAVE CONCERN

Most of the factories are not following the health protocols properly, said Ahsan H Mansur, executive director at Policy Research Institute (PRI).

At a discussion on Saturday at Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, it was decided that a health protocol will be developed both by the government and by the garment sector trade bodies and training would be provided to the key executives and workers before reopening.

After completion of those formalities, the factories were supposed to reopen from May 4 or 5 in phases, Mansur told The Daily Star.

Unfortunately, the factories started reopening from the next day without the health protocols.

As a result, there are hardly any changes in many factories, he said, adding that it will create a bad image for the country as well as for the sector.

“The workers are being made vulnerable. They may get infected. We are heading towards an image crisis,” Mansur said.

Nazma Akter, president of Sammilito Garment Sramik Federation said she is not satisfied with the health safety and social distancing measures taken by the factories.

Some factories are maintaining the health safety measures and many are not, Nazma observed.

“If any worker is infected with the coronavirus, the factory management will have to take the responsibility. We will not take the responsibility,” Akter told The Daily Star by phone.

She also suggested the factory owners to visit the factories regularly as they pushed the workers in the workplaces defying the fear of infection of coronavirus.