

Pay workers

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following two weeks' gap.

According to industrial police, more than 500 factories were shut down temporarily and more than 10,000 workers were laid off from different factories.

The 60 percent salary payment, from the government's Tk 5,000 crore stimulus package, is applicable only for workers of closed factories, and only for the month of April, said Shibnath Roy, inspector general of the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) after the meeting at Sramabhaban in Dhaka.

The running factories will have to pay the full salaries, he added.

"We have decided to pay 60 percent salary to the workers to avoid temporary shutdowns of factories and laying off workers," Shibnath Roy told The Daily Star.

He said if any factory shuts down, the management will have to pay at least 54 percent of gross salary to the workers, according to the labour law of the country.

"So, 60 percent is a better option. The management will not shut down any unit and will not terminate any workers," Roy also said.

Roy said management of many factories had started laying off workers who had not completed one year in their jobs. But the government's decision means those workers cannot be terminated, he said.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in a speech to the nation on March 25, announced a Tk5,000 crore stimulus package for export-oriented sectors.

Amirul Haque Amin, president of National Garment Workers Federation said he is not convinced with the decision.

"We want 100 percent salary for all workers as it is a very difficult time for us all," he told The Day Star over phone.

"The government and factory owners will have to pay 100 percent. They should stand beside the workers with full pay at such a bad time. Cutting 40 percent salary is unjust and shameful," he added.

Nazma Akter, president of Sammilito Garment Sramik Federation also demanded 100 percent payment to all workers.

Many international organisations like the EU and International Labour Organisation, apart from the government, gave assurances of fund for the garment sector.

"The sector has the capacity to pay salaries in full," Nazma Akter said.

Mohammad Hatem, vice president of Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association said they decided on 60 percent so as not to lay

off any workers or shut down any unit.

"We started operations on a limited scale. It might be 25 percent of total capacity. So, we could not absorb all the workers now," said Hatem.

"If the situation improves, we will increase the number of workers. Moreover we cannot call the workers outside Dhaka as per the government decision," Hatem also said.

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association in a WhatsApp message to The Daily Star said 60 percent pay is only for the time being for workers unable to work, but they will get the full pay when they return.

At least 65 factories in two export processing zones (EPZ) in Chattogram announced that they would shut down for 30-45 days due to non-availability of work orders and suspended shipment activities.

Of the number, eight were approved to reopen as of yesterday as the units are restarting operations gradually.

UNREST
Incidents of labour unrest took place in Ashulia and Gazipur yesterday morning, where workers demanded reinstatement of the jobs of laid off workers.

Later, they blockaded the Dhaka-Mymensingh Highway at around 12:00pm in favour of their demand.

The workers withdrew the blockade around 2:30pm after an assurance of reinstatement, Gazipur industrial police said.

Garment workers of a closed factory in Dhaka Export Processing Zone demonstrated in front of Ashulia Press Club, demanding four months' arrears.

Around 500 workers of a factory first went to Bangladesh Export Processing Zone authority's office inside DEPZ and later demonstrated in front of Ashulia Press Club to meet their demands the workers and worker leaders said.

The demonstrating workers said the factory authorities declared the factory shut a couple of months ago without paying the workers' arrears.

When contacted, Abdus Sobhan, general manager of DEPZ, told The Daily Star that as the factory owner could not pay the workers' salaries after rescheduling three or four times, they had cancelled the owner's land lease agreement.

Workers arrears will be paid by selling the factory belongings, said Abdus Sobhan, adding that he hoped it would be done in two months.

In another incident, some 240 probationary laid off workers of two factories in Ashulia's Aukpara area also demonstrated in front of factories, demanding reinstatement, said workers.



This photo taken recently shows homeless people waiting in front of the Supreme Court, the country's apex body for delivering justice, in hopes of getting some assistance from passersby. The shutdown to slow the progress of the outbreak hit the homeless hard.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

Thousands rush in, raise fear of spread

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He further said it was practically impossible to prevent such a huge number of people from entering Dhaka.

"The workers may be thinking that they will lose their jobs... that's why they are returning to Dhaka," added the minister.

Health experts say the move to reopen factories, mostly garment units, will increase the risk of wider transmission of the virus unless proper health safety measures and social distancing are ensured at workplaces and on their way to and from homes.

"This decision [to reopen factories] is not right. It will put the people at a serious risk," Prof Muzaherul Huq, former adviser (Southeast Asia Region) of the World Health Organisation, told The Daily Star recently.

"This is a total violation of the lockdown principle which means people stay at home and maintain social distancing... this would increase the rate of infections..."

The expert said the government might have made the decision considering the economic aspects, but it should not allow factory owners to resume operation before formulation of a safety guideline for workers.

THEY KEPT COMING

Yesterday, two ferry terminals at Shimulia-Kathalbari and Paturia-Dauladia became crowded with hundreds of workers desperate to reach Dhaka and other areas from south-western districts.

Officials and staffers at the terminals said a large number of people crossed the Padma river by ferries on Monday, a day after many garment factories resumed operation. The number of

passengers went up significantly on Tuesday and yesterday.

"Today, the rush is like that of normal times," said Shamsul Abedin, assistant manager of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC), at Kathalbari terminal.

Police personnel were there but it was not possible for them to intercept such a huge number of people, he pointed out. Now seven ferries are transporting vehicles carrying goods and vehicles for emergency services a day. Usually, 15 to 17 ferries ply the route, he added.

A BIWTC staffer at Shimulia terminal said the number of people crossing the river rose sharply over the last three days.

"A few minutes ago, a ferry anchored at the terminal with around 800 people. It was full to the brim," he told this newspaper around 2:30pm.

The situation was the same at Paturia-Dauladia Ferry Terminal.

Zillur Rahman, BIWTC deputy general manager at the terminal, said the number of people using ferries increased after police withdrew barricades there on Monday.

Ohidul Islam, a worker of a garment factory in Tongi, said the manager of his factory phoned him on Monday and asked him to leave his village home in Bagerhat for the workplace.

"I didn't dare to question him why I needed to travel such a long distance to join work when the authorities said our wages would be deposited to our bKash accounts."

"Overcoming all the obstacles on the road, I reached Tongi from Bagerhat to save my job," he added.

Our Gazipur correspondent saw a large number of people, mostly workers,

on Dhaka-Mymensingh Highway. They were travelling to Gazipur and Dhaka, defying all the odds.

Police put up barricades in Bhabanipur and didn't let any vehicle cross the area to enter Gazipur. Many people, however, crossed the area on foot and then took battery-run autorickshaws to reach their destinations.

In Narayanganj, many workers travelled from Cumilla and Laxmipur to join work at the garment factories in the industrial belt.

Asked about yesterday's influx, Md Rezaul Haque, additional secretary at the labour ministry, said the owners had promised that they would not ask workers staying outside Dhaka to join work at their factories.

"We don't know how and why the workers are coming to Dhaka," he said.

There are 23 crisis management committees to see whether factory owners are violating the government instructions while running their factories, mentioned Rezaul.

"We will take action if any factory owner has called in workers from outside Dhaka. Steps will be taken if social distancing and health safety measures are not ensured in factories in line with the government instructions," he warned.

Ruhil Amin, executive president of Garments Sramik Trade Union Centre, alleged that the owners of many factories are asking their workers to join work from outside Dhaka, ignoring the decision of the government and Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

He also claimed that most of the factories are not ensuring social

WHO says it acted quickly, decisively

REUTERS, Geneva

The chief of the World Health Organization (WHO) defended the agency's record in its response to the new coronavirus in a news briefing yesterday, saying it had acted "quickly and decisively".

The Geneva-based UN body has faced mounting criticism in recent weeks, especially from top donor the United States, which has cut off funding.

"From the beginning, the WHO has acted quickly and decisively to respond to warn the world," WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said after giving a timeline of what the body knew in the lead-up to declaring Covid-19 a global emergency on January 30.

"We sounded the alarm early and we sounded it often," he added.

Tedros showcased the work of the WHO over recent months, saying it has trained 2.3 million health workers, shipped millions of tests and even brought "music and laughter" in dark hours through a telecast with pop superstar Lady Gaga.

distancing and health safety measures for workers.

Contacted, BGMEA President Rubana Huq said they clearly said the workers who are staying outside Dhaka need not return and that their wages for April will be deposited to their accounts.

"We also told our members that no attempt should be made to bring back workers..." she wrote in a text message to this newspaper.

She further mentioned that the BGMEA conveyed to the members that it would not cooperate with them if they don't follow its guidelines which clearly say no workers from outside should return to work.

"Hundreds out of millions of workers heading for Dhaka just proves that this is an isolated case and is not under anyone's control," she added.

BGMEA Vice President Arshad Jamal Dipu said about 42 percent garment workers have so far joined work, and most of them are from Dhaka and adjacent areas.

He, however, mentioned that around two lakh workers may have returned to work from outside Dhaka.

"We did not call them... They might have returned, knowing that factories are reopening. We have strictly instructed the authorities of factories not to bring back workers from outside Dhaka," he told The Daily Star last night.

He further said the factories introduced several measures to ensure safety of workers.

"Though we found some shortcomings on the first day, the situation has improved a lot. We did not get any complaint regarding safety issues as of today," added Arshad.

Dhaka, Delhi

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steps taken by the two countries to combat the pandemic and reiterated their commitment to work together for this purpose.

They also agreed to advance the initiatives that the Sarr countries took to fight the Covid-19 in a video conference held last month in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak.

Hasina extended thanks to Modi for sending medicine and other medical equipment to Bangladesh to fight the Covid-19 pandemic.

"The Indian prime minister phoned Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina around 5:50pm and extended Bangla Nabo Barsho and Ramadan greetings to her and the people of Bangladesh," Ihsanul said.

"The Bangladesh prime minister also extended Ramadan greetings to Narendra Modi and the people of India," he said.

Modi paid tributes to Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on the occasion of his birth centenary, he added.

In another development, Swedish PM Stefan Lofven yesterday assured Hasina that his country would not cancel any garment product orders from Bangladesh.

"We'll continue importing RMG products from Bangladesh," he said while talking to Hasina over phone.

In reply, Hasina expressed her firm optimism that Bangladesh could deliver the ordered RMG products of global buyers despite the coronavirus outbreak.

"The Swedish premier phoned Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina around 2:00pm and exchanged greetings with her," Ihsanul told UNB.

During the 15-minute conversation, he said the two leaders discussed trade and business issues, particularly the RMG sector.

"We're hopeful that we could meet the orders of the RMG products of the international buyers, including Sweden, despite the present situation caused by the coronavirus outbreak," Hasina said.

She said the RMG factory owners in Bangladesh reopened their factories by ensuring health protocols.

The press secretary said the issue of coronavirus situation in both the countries also came up during their discussions.

The two prime ministers praised the steps taken by both the countries in containing the pandemic.

In this regard, Hasina reiterated her call to the international community to work together to combat the Covid-19 pandemic, Ihsanul added.

Boro farmers of Sylhet

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middlemen and loss for farmers," he said.

Abdul Hannan, general secretary of Bangladesh Krishak Samiti in Kulaura, alleged that corrupt officials of the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) were naming hoarders in the list of farmers. He demanded that the list be made public.

Communist Party leader Chittaranjan Talukder said an overwhelming majority of the farmers cultivate the paddy by taking loans at high interest rates and they could not afford to wait.

Several Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) officials, who have been preparing the list of farmers, said they were too busy monitoring relief efforts at villages and finalising the lists would take at least a week.

"We also have a manpower shortage and our officers have other tasks.

Mugda hospital now at capacity

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As he waited on the ground for a bed, he was not wearing gloves, and was only protected by a flimsy surgical mask.

He said he too was referred to the hospital by doctors at DMCH where he had gone earlier.

"I sat on the ground the whole day. I have not been allowed into the hospital because I am coronavirus positive. I am going back to Narayanganj. I will stay home and try to recover. If I die, I will die at home," he told The Daily Star over phone later in the day.

Asked, Meerjady Sabrina Flora, director of Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), told this correspondent, "We do not know how many patients who are coronavirus positive are dying at home. That is an important statistic we do not have."

Coronavirus claims

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"The IEDCR sent the test report around 3:45pm today [yesterday]. The report stated that he contracted Covid-19," said Md Shahed, chairman of the hospital.

Several ministers, political leaders, journalist organisations, and inspector general of police expressed condolence over his death.

He left behind his wife, two daughters, a son, and a host of relatives and colleagues to mourn his death.

Humayun, also president of Brihottor Cumilla Sangbadik Samity, had earlier worked for different media houses, including Amader Somoy and Dainik Manabzamin.

Meanwhile, constable Jasim, who was in self-quarantine and had died on Tuesday night, tested positive for coronavirus yesterday.

"The 40-year-old constable was in self-quarantine since he showed flu symptoms on April 25... His samples were collected a couple of days ago.

However, we will make the list within the next one week, said Hasan-ud-Daulah, upazila agriculture officer in Tahripur, Sunamganj.

Safar Uddin, deputy director at DAE in Sunamganj, said, "We will make the list by May 5 and verify it by May 7... and purchase will start from May 11."

Debol Sarkar, upazila agriculture officer in Barlekha, Moulvibazar, also said finalising the list may take at least another week.

According to the DAE, paddy was cultivated in 4,74,195 hectares this year. Over 27,96,000 tonnes of paddy is expected to have been produced. More than 41 percent of the produce has been harvested as of last Sunday.

Each farmer will be allowed to sell a maximum of three tonnes to the government this year.

guards standing in front of the hospital's emergency gates said in the last two days between 60 and 85 coronavirus positive patients showed up, presented their IEDCR test results and sought beds. But they all had to leave.

"We need to open other hospitals quickly [for coronavirus patients]. There are more patients than empty beds," said Dr Shah.

A similar fate was met by a young couple and their baby from Wari. None of them wore gloves, or any other protective gear, save for surgical masks.

"I tested positive for coronavirus, but I cannot be home quarantined, so I came to the hospital to seek a bed. At the same time, I wanted to get my wife and baby tested. But they are saying that there is no vacancy so we are going back home," he said.

He tested positive today [yesterday]," Azizur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Wari Police Station, told The Daily Star.

The constable was in self-quarantine at a hotel in Fakirerpool area. As his condition worsened, he was taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital around 10:00pm on Tuesday where doctors declared him dead, police said.

Expressing deep shock at the death of Jasim, Bangladesh Police Headquarters said he was a proud member of the force who was a field-level frontline fighter against the deadly virus.

Bangladesh Police will turn the shock of losing Jasim Uddin into strength, says a press release of Police Headquarters.

Police will always stand by Jasim Uddin's family, it added.

More than 200 police personnel have so far been infected and over 600 have been in quarantine across the country.

Ramp up the response now

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director general (administration) of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), said in a bulletin, aired online.

Besides, 11 more patients receiving treatment at different hospitals recovered over the same period, which brought the total number of recovery cases to 150.

In those 24 hours, 4,968 samples were tested across the country. The number was 14.68 percent higher than that of the previous day.

Of the total deceased, 137 were from Dhaka division, said the DGHS official.

Among the newly deceased, six were male and were from Dhaka, Dr Nasima said.

Age-wise, four of them were above 60, two between 51 and 60 and the rest between 31 and 40.

A total of 104 people were placed in isolation in those 24 hours across the country.

TECHNICAL COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

At Tuesday's meeting, the 17-member National Technical Advisory Committee came up with multiple advices on improving the standard of hospital care to win the fight against coronavirus.

3 upscale pvt hospitals get testing permits

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general (administration) of Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), told The Daily Star yesterday.

There are some 5,500 registered private hospitals and clinics across the country.

Many doctors and staff of private hospitals already tested positive for coronavirus although the diagnosis and treatment facilities for the disease were limited to government hospitals.

Arif Mahmud, senior general manager of Evercare Hospital, said they would start coronavirus testing from Saturday, adding that they were working out details of their testing facilities.

"... Already you know a huge number of medical staff are infected. So if we can identify the corona patients then it would be safe for other patients as well as for the staff."

He also said this test will help medical personnel maintain appropriate protocols before treating a patient.

According to Bangladesh Doctors Foundation, a private platform of

doctors, a total of 440 doctors were infected till yesterday.

Many healthcare professionals are either in quarantine or self-isolation.

Although the outdoor patients will not be able to take Covid-19 tests in the private hospitals, health officials said the facilities would gradually be beefed up.

Asked about the limited scope for testing, Prof Nasima said,

"We are not permitting outdoor patients considering that if anyone tests positive, the private hospitals will not be able to bring that person under surveillance."

"This is the first step and certainly we will move forward with a positive attitude to gradually scale it up," she added.

Prof Muzaherul Huq, former adviser (Southeast Asia Region) at the World Health Organization, said, "Definitely, it is a good initiative. Now it is the time to expand the facilities across the country, but at the same time we have to keep an eye on the quality of the tests."