

Assad warns of virus 'catastrophe' as Syria lockdown eases

AFP, Damascus

President Bashar al-Assad warned Monday of a "catastrophe" in war-battered Syria if the easing of lockdown measures against coronavirus is mishandled.

The government in Damascus has officially recorded 44 cases of Covid-19, including three deaths, while Kurdish authorities in the country's northeast have announced three cases in areas under their control.

The relatively low number of recorded cases does not mean Syria is "out of the danger zone", Assad told the government's coronavirus crisis body.

"Although the numbers are limited, this doesn't mean they can't explode suddenly in a matter of days or maybe weeks," he said in a video shared on the presidency's social media channels.

"This will put us in the face of a real catastrophe that would overwhelm the state's health and logistical capabilities."

Govt recruits

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considered void," the gazette notification read.

Health examination and police verification of these doctors will be conducted later, it added.

In order to speed up coronavirus treatment, the PSC on April 30 recommended the recruitment of 2,000 doctors from 39th Special BCS as per the demand of the Ministry of Public Administration. It also recommended 5,054 nurses to meet the emergency demand of state to tackle the coronavirus crisis.

So far, more than 550 doctors have been infected with coronavirus, while many others have had to go to quarantine. Besides, some new hospitals are also being set up for coronavirus patients.

As a result, demand letters were sent to the PSC for the recruitment of 2,000 doctors and 6,000 nurses to address the manpower crisis.

Schools, colleges

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have been cancelled for the crisis.

The government started TV education through Sangsad TV for secondary students on March 29, for primary students on April 7, and for technical and madrasa students on April 19, so that students can make up for some of the losses due to closure of schools.

Many guardians said it was only partially fulfilling the objective, as about a half of the country's people -- many of them underprivileged -- do not have access to TV sets.

The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey-2019 of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics shows that 50 percent households of the country do not have television sets.

CTTC wants

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March 10 and March 11 with Hazaribagh and Kamrangirchar police stations respectively.

Fifty-three days into his disappearance, Kajol was "discovered" by Border Guard Bangladesh in Benapole on Sunday. But he was arrested -- initially on charges of trespassing, and later in the evening under section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) -- and sent to Jashore Central Jail.

Section 54 of the CrPC stipulates that a person can be arrested without a warrant if there is "credible information" of his involvement with a "cognisable offence".

Jashore Kotwali Police Station's Officer-in-charge Moniruzzaman told this correspondent, "He has been arrested under section 54 because he is accused in three cases filed under the digital security act."

Monorom Polok, son of Kajol, said, "We were unable to post bail because he was arrested under section 54 in the evening when the Jashore court was closed."

Article 19, an international human rights organisation which defends and promotes freedom of expression, circulated a statement yesterday demanding the release of Kajol.

"While the government is releasing prisoners to prevent the spread of coronavirus in prisons, there is no rationale for sending Kajol to jail now as he is not accused in any heinous crime like murder, rape, terrorism, militancy, or treason," said Faruq Faisal, Article 19 regional director for Bangladesh and South Asia.

"The three lawsuits filed against him are identical and all of them are filed under the controversial Digital Security Act only for expressing his views on Facebook."

"At least in one of the cases, the other accused have been released on bail. So logically the question arises as to why the authorities are so enthusiastic to put Kajol behind the bars," Faruq said.

"After Kajol went missing, his family filed a case of kidnapping. Therefore, where Kajol had been for more than two months, where he was taken, by whom and why, how he came to the Benapole border - these questions must be clearly answered immediately," he further said.

If anyone found involved in Kajol's disappearance, action must be taken against them, he added.



A policeman inside a transparent booth recording information of some fellow policemen outside the Central Police Hospital in the capital's Rajarbagh yesterday. The cops would then visit doctors in the hospital to see if they need to be tested for Covid-19.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Untapped when needed most

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committee to engage the university's scientists and experts in the Covid-19 response.

The technical committee sent a proposal to the health ministry stating the university's readiness to offer its laboratories for Covid-19 diagnosis, its experts' availability to provide training at newly developed testing facilities, and their capacity to manufacture RT-PCR test kits at an affordable cost.

However, the committee is yet to receive a reply to its proposal.

"We have been waiting for a month now since sending our proposal," said Dr Mamun Ahmed, a professor of DU's department of biochemistry and molecular biology and a member of the technical committee.

He was, however, told on April 27 by the administration that the health ministry had expressed interest in using the department's laboratory as a testing facility.

"But we have not received a formal reply to our proposal yet," said the molecular virology expert.

The National Institute of Biotechnology, a leading government institute in the field, also has a RT-PCR-equipped BSL-2 laboratory and a team of around 40 scientists. This facility is also left unutilised.

Till last year, the institute has trained more than 100 scientists and technicians in handling and maintenance of RT-PCR instruments and biosafety hoods, said Palash Kumer Sarker, chief scientific officer of its microbial biotechnology division.

"We can train more and we are capable of conducting Covid-19 tests. It is unfortunate that our resources are not being utilised in this time of crisis."

Professor Dr Nasima Sultana, additional director general (administration) of the DGHS, said, "We have already visited many government institutions. The laboratories of some of these institutions need to be developed for Covid-19 tests. We are taking steps to expand testing facilities to the eligible

laboratories."

Many government and non-government institutions that have RT-PCR machines are not eligible to conduct Covid-19 tests as they don't have biosafety hoods, she added.

Dr Nasima did not say anything specifically when asked about the DU technical committee's proposal.

Scientists urge support and effective coordination from the government in this regard.

Prof Dr Muhammad Manjurul Karim of DU's microbiology department pointed out how doctors and academics in the field could benefit from collaboration.

"In our universities, microbiologists and biotechnologists don't get the opportunity to interact with patients although they conduct extensive research on these subjects using the most modern technology available.

"On the other hand, doctors frequently interact with patients but they have limited opportunities to conduct fundamental research on these subjects in the medical colleges."

The health ministry can coordinate so that researchers in universities receive a constant supply of samples from the medical centres, added Dr Manjurul.

Besides coordination, these institutions also need logistical support from the ministry, said Dr Md Iqbal Kabir Jahid, a professor of JUST's microbiology department and associate director of the Genome Centre.

The university institutes have limited funding and supplies of laboratory equipment, he said.

"Some institutes may have the instruments but their biosafety level may need upgradation. Other institutes may not have sufficient funds to purchase essential laboratory equipment."

"If the health ministry comes forward to plug these gaps, we shall be able to deploy a massive force of manpower and equipment to detect and fight Covid-19," said Dr Iqbal.

Researchers are also concerned about the shortage of skilled manpower in the future and emphasised improving training programmes to handle the crisis now.

In JUST's Genome Centre, only a handful of teachers could be deployed for conducting Covid-19 tests. Dr Iqbal said his team had to refuse many samples from suspected Covid-19 patients due to a shortage of manpower.

In CVASU, the teachers have engaged several students in conducting Covid-19 tests -- starting from April 25.

"Many of our students and teachers only have short-term training on handling pathogens like Covid-19 and RT-PCR instruments," said Professor Dr AMAM Zonae Siddiki, of CVASU's department of pathology and parasitology.

As a result, they are worried about the risks and many are reluctant to work in the laboratory, he said.

"In this situation, the authorities concerned should enhance training facilities to produce more expert hands."

Researchers are also asking for financial security from the government as many of them are working on a voluntary basis and without health insurance, despite the risks.

"We, the faculty, have been working in the testing facility without any remuneration for weeks as we consider it a service to the nation," said Dr Zonae.

"Since, we have to recruit more people in the near future, particularly young researchers, to manage the increasing number of cases, we should develop a remuneration plan and health insurance plan for this workforce."

Professor Dr Nasima Sultana of DGHS told The Daily Star there is no such plan so far due to the uncertainty of the crisis and how long it might last.

"So, we have not developed any remuneration plan for these researchers yet. But, we have collected the names of those who have been working in the laboratories."

Covid-19 testing.

"As the number of tests is increasing day by day, the committee said the quality of the tests should not be compromised," he said.

He also mentioned that the committee said the government should not allow people to leave their current residences ahead of the upcoming Eid. He pointed out that the government has already given such directives.

Habibur Rahman, also the chief of health ministry's media cell, said the meeting also decided that the authorities must take steps so that no patient is deprived of treatment at any hospital.

"If any hospital cannot provide treatment to a particular patient, the hospital must ensure his or her treatment at another hospital," he said.

He said the safety of doctors and other health workers were also discussed at the meeting.

On April 28, the technical committee in its second meeting came up with multiple advices on improving the standard of hospital care to win the fight against coronavirus.

One of those was increasing case detection measures and selecting new hospitals for treating Covid-19 patients. It also advocated for using makeshift hospitals for patients with mild to moderate coronavirus infections.

COVID-19 CASES KEEP RISING

One person died of coronavirus infection in 24 hours till 2:30pm yesterday, the DGHS said in a briefing, aired online. Prof Dr Nasima Sultana, additional director general (administration) at the DGHS, said the deceased was male and aged between 21 and 30.

As many as 193 Covid-19 patients recovered across the country in those 24 hours, taking the total number of recovery cases to 1,403. They include those who recovered staying at home as well as in institutionalised care, Prof Nasima said at the briefing.

A total of 5,711 samples were tested over the same period, she said, adding another 128 people were put under isolation across the country.

2 journos sued under DSA land in jail

STAR REPORT

Two journalists landed in jail in Sunamganj and Cox's Bazar yesterday, hours after they were picked up from their homes in connection with two cases filed under the Digital Security Act.

The arrestees are Mohammad Mahtab Uddin Talukder, 40, Sunamganj correspondent of SATV and also the editor-publisher of Daily Haorancholer Katha; and Mohammad Shahidullah, 52, a special correspondent of national daily Bangla Patrika.

Police picked up Mahtab from his home in Balakapara area of Sunamganj around 2:00am, said Delowar Hossain, officer-in-charge of Dharmapasha Police Station.

He was sued over posting a Facebook status on lawmaker Mouazzam Hossain Ratan from Sunamganj-1.

The case was filed on Monday night with Dharmapasha Police Station by Benuar Hossain Khan Pathan of Uttarbir village in the district's Dharmapasha upazila. Benuar is the general secretary of Shelbarash union Awami League in the upazila.

Citing the case statement, the

OC said the accused in a Facebook status at 9:45pm on Monday said the lawmaker was arrested by the Anti-Corruption Commission, but the information was false and defamatory.

Ashek Suja Mamun, inspector (prosecution) of Sunamganj police, said a local court sent the journalist to jail after he was produced before it yesterday afternoon.

In Cox's Bazar, police arrested Shahidullah over making "derogatory remarks" against another journalist.

Shahidullah was picked up from his home in South Rumaliarchara area of Cox's Bazar around 3:00pm yesterday, said Shajahan Kabir, OC of Cox's Bazar Sadar Model Police Station.

The case was filed by Ahmed Sumon, Cox's Bazar correspondent of SATV, on Sunday night.

Quoting the case statement, the OC said the accused disseminated "objectionable and false information" regarding Sumon through Facebook on May 1. It damaged the plaintiff's reputation.

Later in the day, a local court sent Shahidullah to jail after he was produced before it, the OC added.

Our correspondents from Sylhet and Cox's Bazar contributed to this report.

Stepping down for sake

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also receive clothes, books and stationary, and monthly stipends.

So why did Kishore choose to suddenly move away from all of this?

"I never wanted to maintain a grip on the post of chairperson for myself. I wanted new leadership to come forward from within the organisation...I always wanted youth leadership to take charge, and steer the organisation with their talents."

Asked, if there was any other reason behind his resignation, he said there were several other factors.

There are allegations that some religious bigots have been disparaging Kishore for his being a Hindu on Bidyananda's Facebook page.

Yesterday, the page was forced to announce, "Our founder cannot dedicate much time since he resides abroad. About 90 percent of this mammoth task is done by Muslim volunteers. Nevertheless, many resort to spreading false information, targeting our founder's religious identity. We wanted to reveal this matter after the current campaigns, but the abuses have crossed all limits in the last few days. So to extinguish the fire, we are sharing this news."

Kishore said, "I have always grown up knowing my identity as a human is bigger. The name Bidyanondo was given by a Muslim brand expert. It means 'fun through learning'. But many think that the foundation was named after some specific person."

"For the last six months, I have been facing abuse for being a Hindu. When we started working to combat the hunger crisis after the coronavirus pandemic, the abuse intensified. It hurt me that people used religion as a ploy to harass me. This was affecting

our work. Even some donors had issues with fact that I am a Hindu," he said.

"After observing all of this, resigning as the organisation's chairperson seemed a better option," Kishore said, adding, "Let people stop their abuses. Let the organisation's work flourish."

As the news of his resignation spread, volunteers of the foundation issued an amendment to the previous announcement saying that discussions were still underway regarding whether or not Kishore would continue as the chairperson.

To that, Kishore said, "I don't know what I did to deserve such a love from them. Where Bidyanondo is today is entirely because of their contributions. All of my volunteers have other professions -- some of them have full-time jobs, others are students. They are our strength. Our work is resource-intensive, and this comes from lakhs of people from within the country and abroad who believe in us. So I announced in March that I am resigning. I will continue to be with them in other capacities."

Asked, if people collectively requested him to stay on, would he reconsider his resignation?

"I am proud to walk a path that is opposite to this society's mentality of holding onto the power. I never wanted to be known as a founder. Besides, why should it matter what position I hold? Now I am the chairperson, I might be in a lower position in the future -- perhaps as an organising secretary."

"... Bidyanondo is not my personal property. It belongs to the general people regardless of religion, caste or identity. I am willing to sacrifice anything for it."

Are we leaving too much

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Disease Control and Research (IEDCR).

The epidemiologist further said, "If we do not allow people on the streets, the virus will take longer to spread..."

"But any wrong decision will cause a tsunami-like situation," he warned.

So far, social distancing in the form of lockdown has been the most effective weapon for a developing country like Bangladesh to combat coronavirus. But lax monitoring on that front coupled with gradual decline of civic awareness and voluntary participation, has put the collective consciousness into some sort of resignation.

We are perhaps in a state of mind of leaving the fight against Covid-19 to chance, unconsciously resorting to divine blessings more than a concerted effort to save us from what could possibly have a devastating impact.

"The situation is very complex. Community transmission is going on and the numbers are rising, while the rate of detection is still low. We have to increase the number of tests by a lot to fathom the situation," Benazir Ahmed, former director (disease control) of the Directorate General of Health Services, told this newspaper.

Unless many more cases are detected through widespread testing, community transmission will continue and the situation will be out of hand, he pointed out.

While testing is of paramount importance, the opening of factories especially the worker-heavy garment factories actually made things more complicated as far as social distancing is concerned.

And once businesses and shopping malls reopen on May 10, the situation may get even more complicated.

The garment industry, which contributes 80 percent of the country's forex earnings, employs around 45 lakh workers while around one crore people are involved in businesses and shopping malls.

And then add a huge number

of people coming out to buy merchandise, which could potentially create an ideal situation for Covid-19 to prosper, even if they don't go on a buying spree normally associated with festivals.

The government warned that social distancing and safety of workers in factories should be strictly maintained. It also said the same safety measures and social distancing should be enforced in businesses and shopping malls once they open.

But we have seen enough of mockery in the name of social distancing in kitchen markets every day almost everywhere in the country and we are hardly aware of the strict implementation of social distancing behind closed doors in those garment factories.

Anyone involved in the apparel business knows that social distancing in factories is quite impossible unless those units produce high-quality garments and that the buyers pay them well.

But for most garment factories that produce basic and cheap garments social distancing is simply not cost-effective. Survival of those factories depend on per-hour production efficiency, and more space and more production hours for the same output are a luxury they can hardly afford.

France is one of the worst victims of Covid-19, which has hit Europe hard. The affluent European country, which recorded more than 25,000 deaths caused by the pandemic, has been able to stymie the deadly virus recently.

While announcing the plan to reopen the economy in phases last week, French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe told his countrymen that they "will have to learn to live with the virus" with no vaccine or proven treatment yet available.

It is also true for the rest of the world.

But we are probably living with the invisible enemy a wee bit dangerously and hoping the Almighty would rescue us.