

2 more sent to jail

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On Wednesday, Rab-3 Assistant Director Abu Bakar Siddique filed the case with the Ramna Police Station against the eleven, including Cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore, writer Mushtaq Ahmed, Swedish-Bangladeshi journalist Tasneem Khalil, and blogger Asif Mohiuddin.

Kishore and Mushtaq landed in jail on Wednesday after a Dhaka court rejected their bail prayer.

Talking to The Daily Star, Supreme Court lawyer Jyotirmoy Barua said, “If the accused had published something which is a subject matter of the law, then it is a public document and can be accessed from any computer system or even from a smartphone.

“So what is the justification for taking a person on remand? What else can a police officer find other than the published statement?” he questioned.

“It was not right to accuse all the 11 people in the same case. If there is any specific allegation against someone, a case should be filed against the person separately. Now for one, the other 10 may suffer,” he added.

Meanwhile, 37 noted citizens in a statement yesterday demanded the withdrawal of the case filed under the Digital Security Act.

“We are decrying the action taken by the government and demand that the case be withdrawn. Freedom of expression is a constitutional right. It is extremely worrying that people are being forced into silence by threats of arrest, detention and lawsuit during this pandemic,” said the statement.

The signatories include former adviser to a caretaker government Hafizuddin Khan; noted human rights activists Sultana Kamal and Khushi Kabir; Transparency International, Bangladesh Executive Director Dr Iftekharuzzaman; jurist Shahdeen Malik; photojournalist Shahidul Alam; anthropologist Rahnuma Ahmed; Professor Ali Riaz of Illinois State University; Professor Mirza Taslima Sultana of Jahangirnagar University; and Supreme Court lawyers Sara Hossain, Syeda Rizwana Hasan and Jyotirmoy Barua.

They also criticised the imprisonment of photojournalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol.

Make sure

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Kamal, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan and Law Minister Anisul Huq -- attended the meeting, with the PM in the chair.

The previous cabinet meeting was held on April 6.

Talking to The Daily Star after yesterday’s meeting, the law minister said the PM expressed satisfaction at the handling of the coronavirus situation by different government organisations.

She said the Covid-19 pandemic was seriously affecting the police department as a growing number of cops were getting infected with coronavirus while carrying out their duties.

“So, there should be adequate arrangements to admit infected police personnel to hospitals,” Anisul said quoting Hasina as saying.

The PM also informed the meeting that the government was taking measures to boost isolation facilities for Covid-19 patients.

According to statistics of the Police Headquarters, 90 policemen were infected with Covid-19 across the country in 24 hours till 2:30pm yesterday.

The total number of infected policemen reached 1,285 at 2:30pm yesterday. Of them, six have died and 93 recovered so far.

Besides, 1,089 others were placed in isolation after they showed coronavirus-like symptoms and 2,689, who came in close contact with those infected, have been kept in quarantine, shows the PHQ data.

ORDINANCES APPROVED

Yesterday, the cabinet approved an ordinance allowing courts to hold trials digitally using the information technology in view of the coronavirus pandemic.

It also gave the final approval to “The Value Added Tax and Supplementary Duty (amendment) Act, 2020” and “The

In a separate statement, a number of former student leaders also demanded Kajol’s release.

They include Shafi Ahmed, Nur Ahmed Bakul, Nazmul Haque Prodhon, Sirajum Munir and Bazlur Rashid Firoze. **ARREST OF 2 JOURNOS**
The arrested journalists are Mir Jamal, 28, Barguna correspondent of banglanews24.com, and Sumon Sikder, 28, Barguna correspondent of Channel News 24, Bangla Tribune and Daily Desh Rupantar.

Banglanews24.com and Bangla Tribune suspended the two and will investigate the allegations of violation of journalistic ethics against them.

10-month-old dies

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from respiratory disease since birth, deteriorated. However, they could not take him to a hospital due to the lockdown, Zillur said.

He also alleged that they repeatedly tried to communicate with the ward councillor through mobile phone, but he did not respond.

When they finally managed to go out on Tuesday morning, the child died on the way to the hospital. The baby’s life could have been saved if they could take him to a hospital on time, Zillur lamented.

Contacted, ward councillor Mukul Hossain said he did not get any phone call from the family on Monday night. He said he arranged for an ambulance on Tuesday morning after hearing of the issue but unfortunately the baby died on the way to the hospital.

Asked about the lockdown, Mukul said it was enforced for the greater interest of all residents living in the area. The local administration and health department were aware of it, he added.

Mahfuz Alam, officer-in-charge of Lalmonirhat Sadar Police Station, said he sent a police team when the house was locked down, following recommendation of the local coronavirus protection committee.

The district’s Civil Surgeon Dr Nirmalendu Roy said the baby’s sample had been collected for Covid-19 test.

Income-tax Amendment Ordinance, 2020,” reports BSS.

“It is necessary to formulate a legal framework to continue the trial process in courts digitally or through videoconferencing using information technology as the backlog of cases is getting larger due to the nationwide shutdown over the coronavirus pandemic,” Cabinet Secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam told a news briefing at his Secretariat office after the cabinet meeting.

“So, the cabinet has finally approved the Information Technology Usage Ordinance by the Court, 2020,” he said.

Once the ordinance comes into force, trials can be held digitally without the physical presence of lawyers and their clients in courts.

The cabinet secretary said the ordinance was brought to the cabinet for its approval as the public and private organisations, with some exceptions, have been shut for the last one month due to Covid-19 situation.

Due to the shutdown, the litigants have long been deprived of getting justice and the backlog of cases is getting larger, he added.

Anwarul said the Income-tax (amendment) Ordinance, 2020 seeks to allow the taxpayers to pay their taxes without any penalty and interest for their failure to pay taxes in due time. They could not do so as all the official activities of the income tax department remained suspended since March 26 over the coronavirus pandemic.

The top bureaucrat said the cabinet also gave the go-ahead to the Value Added Tax and Supplementary Duty (amendment) Act, 2020 to allow the Board of Revenue to extend the time limit for submission of VAT return without penalty and interest in case of any natural disaster, pandemic and emergency situation.



With Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in the chair, a cabinet meeting being held at the Gono Bhaban yesterday. This was the first cabinet meeting after about a month and a small number of cabinet members attended the meeting, maintaining social distancing.

PHOTO: PTD

UGC allows conditional online grading

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be allowed to evaluate exams of practical and lab courses only after reopening of the universities.

UGC member Prof Dil Afroza Begum, who has overseen the formulation of directive, told this newspaper that all viva should be held individually and without any kind of malpractice.

“We are putting emphasis on transparency and quality of test via viva,” she said.

Students who will be not able to take online classes and exams, they should be allowed to take special classes to complete their courses. After that, they will sit for exams with the universities reopening, she added.

The universities will not be permitted to charge any extra from students who are out of online classes and exams.

Commission sources said only 63 universities out of 151 now have online classes. Of them, only four to five are public universities, and the rest are private.

Private universities that have not started online classes should specifically inform the UGC about their plan to complete their current semesters by May 17, said Prof Dil Afroza.

The universities can hold admission tests in June, and the next semester will begin in July, said the UGC directive.

It added that the universities would not put pressure on guardians and students for tuition and other fees during the ongoing crisis. It also asked them to waive and reduce semester fees from students facing financial hardship or give them an option to pay the fees in instalments.

The private university authorities must pay salaries to their teachers and staffers regularly, the directive mentioned.

The commission issued the directive in line with the decisions made at a meeting among Education Minister Dipu Moni, UGC top officials, and leaders of Association of Private Universities of Bangladesh (APUB) on

the issue on April 30.

The meeting was held as UGC and APUB were at odds over awarding grades to students without holding semester finals, enrolling new students without admission tests, and holding tests online.

On April 10, the UGC rejected an APUB request to postpone its decisions of not allowing grading students without holding semester finals, enrolling new students without admission tests, and holding tests online.

In a letter to the UGC chairman on that day, the APUB chairman said they were requesting the commission to postpone its decisions until holding a discussion with their association.

The commission on April 6 asked private universities to stop assigning their current students grades through online exams and evaluation, and to stop enrolling new students without admission tests amid the closure of educational institutions.

Importers reach out to farmers

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“The import has reduced by 80 percent, so we have become interested in local wheat,” Hasan Ali, a flour mill owner of Thakurgaon, said.

Private buyers are providing cash to local traders in advance for collecting wheat from local markets, traders say.

“Import of wheat will remain less for some time over the coronavirus situation. We’re buying to avoid future crisis,” said Md Khademul Islam, a wheat trader of Boda bazar in Panchagarh.

Md Israil Hossain, director General of Bangladesh Wheat and Maize Research Institute (BWMRI), warned, “Any failure in the government procurement [of wheat] might not be a good thing this year.”

“If private buyers fear less import due to the corona situation, the government’s import is going to face the same impact. In that case, creating food storage based on the local market will be wise,” he said.

The country is dependent on wheat import as it produces only around 18 percent of its total annual demand of 70 lakh tonnes. This year’s production covers only 17.78 percent of the demand, Md Israil told The Daily Star.

FARMERS’ ACCOUNT

Most farmers are not even aware of government procurement in Jhenaidah, where wheat is selling at Tk 30 per kg -- Tk 2 more than the government price.

“I don’t know whether the government is buying, neither do I have any interest to know. Buyers are coming directly to my crop field. They are offering good prices,” said Arman Ali, a grower of Enayetpur village of Jhenaidah’s Kaliganj upazila.

Wheat grower Amzad Hossain of Thakurgaon district’s Farabari village finds the government procurement process cumbersome.

To procure wheat, the government

selects farmers through a lottery and then asks for 14 percent moisture in the crop, which sometimes becomes impossible to maintain, he said.

“We lose around three kilogram of wheat per maund [1 maund = 40kg] to maintain the moisture level,” Amzad said, explaining that the crop weighs less as it loses moisture.

Private buyers do not impose any moisture content requirement, he added.

Farmers also incur transportation cost to take their produce to the government depots, he said.

Unlike private buyers, who pay upfront, government officials provide a procurement certificate that farmers have to present at banks to collect payments, he added.

Md Samsuzzoha, a grower of Boda upazila in Panchagarh district, produced 28 maunds of wheat from 0.67 acres of his land this season and sold a portion of his crops at Tk 26 per kg.

“I got cash immediately as soon as I harvested. It is not possible at government depots,” he said.

Wheat grower Md Shamsuddin of Rajshahi’s Tanore upazila finds the government’s price for wheat satisfactory since this year his production cost for 37.5 maunds of the crop from one acre of his land was Tk 17 per kg.

He, however, said for sharecroppers the government price is low, explaining that had he leased the land his production cost would have been Tk 27 per kg.

In that case, the government price would not be satisfactory, he said.

However, this year the market price for wheat is higher than last year’s Tk 20 per kg, which was Tk 8 less than the 2019 government price, he said.

Despite a higher wheat price, Shamsuddin was yet to sell his crop, hoping that the price will further increase in the coming months.

SHOULD GOVT INCREASE PRICE?
Food procurement boss Md

Anisuzzaman opines that the government price for wheat, fixed following necessary market assessment, should not be increased.

“We usually keep the price Tk 8 to Tk 10 more than the market price to support farmers. But this year, we feel farmers do not require price support,” he said.

“Our assessment says any increase from the fixed price may leave the market unstable,” he added.

An increase in government price will push the price of wheat further up in the market then flour consumers will have to pay more, he explained.

Talking to The Daily Star on April 24, he said they were yet to conclude that this year’s wheat procurement is set to face a failure.

“We have time up to June for procurement. If the coronavirus situation improves by that time, private buyers will move toward import and farmers will be interested at the government rate,” he hoped.

WHEAT PRODUCTION

Wheat is sown in November-December and harvested in March-April.

This year wheat yield -- production per hectare of land -- has been higher than the last six years’.

This year’s rate of 3.64 tonnes per hectare was achieved because of a prolonged winter and distribution of draught and blast disease tolerant seeds, said Md Abdul Mueyed, director general, the Department of Agricultural Extension.

Besides, wheat has been cultivated in more land than last year’s as many Boro farmers also moved to wheat cultivation after incurring loss in paddy farming, he said.

[Azibor Rahman from Jhenaidah, Ahmed Humayun Kabir Topu from Pabna and Rabiul Hasan from Chapainawabganj contributed to the report]

Eid shopping

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the government, but no hawkers or temporary roadside shops will be allowed.

The DMP also asked that automatic disinfection tunnels or chambers be installed at the entrance of every shopping mall, as well as thermal scanners to measure temperature of shoppers.

“Each store must have a separate temperature measurement system,” reads the directive.

Every shopping mall should follow directives of the health ministry, including the provision of keeping hand sanitisers, and no buyers would be able to enter without wearing masks, the directive said, adding that vendors and store employees should also wear masks and hand gloves.

If anyone goes to market without masks, they will have to buy it before entering, said the DMP, adding that in front of every shopping mall, a banner with the warning “disregarding the health directives will cause life risk” should be put up.

Buyers and sellers should maintain a distance of at least one metre (about 40 inches) during entry, exit, and shopping at each shopping mall, and the mall authorities will not allow more customers to enter the store than can be accommodated while maintaining this distance, read the directive.

The DMP further asked to discourage the elderly, children, and sick persons (those who have heart disease, diabetes, and others) from visiting the shopping malls.

The market authorities will remind those who have finished their shopping by loudspeaker to leave to avoid unnecessary gathering, and the shopping malls have to have separate and clearly marked entry and exit points, according to the directive.

The shopping malls should have a disinfection system in the parking lot, and drivers should stay in their respective vehicles, read the directive.

The directive added that rickshaws and CNG-run auto-rickshaws would be available on a limited scale for travel to shopping malls, but only two passengers could travel in the latter at a time and every passenger and driver would wear masks.

The government had earlier announced that shopping malls and shops can resume business from May 10, after a month and a half of a countrywide shutdown to curb the spread of coronavirus.

Editors’ Council

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under DSA almost automatically leads to arrests.

Mentioning the arrest and imprisonment of photojournalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol, the statement observed that “simple criticism of law makers, district administrations and people in power are behind most of the recent cases.”

“Lawmakers traditionally always stood for free media and freedom of thought and critical thinking. Regrettably a few of them are now a part of the current DSA-led onslaught against the media. Clear preference of filing cases under DSA instead of existing defamation laws indicates a desire to intimidate and harass journalists rather than seek justice,” said the statement.

It pressed the point that the media’s duty is to expose corruption and irregularities and point out the failures of the administration. “This is all more necessary when thousands of crores of taka are being spent by the government to fight the pandemic and its disastrous consequences,” it added.

The Parishad had always opposed the Act, citing fears that it can be used as a weapon to suppress freedom of the media. “Our fear is now a nightmare-reality for the mass media,” said the statement.

“We consider the recent suing and arrest of journalists as clear threats to freedom of press and freedom of expression. We demand immediate release of all journalists and withdrawal of all cases against them. We condemn the frequent and indiscriminate use of DSA against the media and common citizens and demand that the Act be repealed,” concluded the statement.

Medicine supply

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working since the end of January and several decisions, including how the raw materials would be imported, were taken in consultation with all the stakeholders.

He said raw materials of medicines are imported, mainly from China. But as it was one of the worst-hit countries by the pandemic, the DGDA held several meetings with the Bangladesh Association of Pharmaceutical Industries (BAPI) to find alternative sourcing countries.

Bangladesh is currently sourcing the raw materials from India and some European countries, Mahbubur said.

The decisions also included formulation of a guideline to keep the production and supply of medicine smooth, the DGDA director general said.

Although there is no specific treatment for Covid-19, the drug administration started working in advance to increase the production of some supportive medicines, the DGDA chief said.

“We have taken initiative to increase the production of paracetamol, vitamin-c, some antibiotics, and various vitamin supplementary so that there is no crisis if the situation worsens,” Mahbubur said.

He said initiatives were also taken to produce some antiviral drugs like remdesivir and favipiravir, which are being used to treat corona patients on a limited scale.

“We hope that remdesivir will hit the

market by May 20. Two companies have already started producing it,” he said.

“We have our all-out supports to the companies to go for maximum production and also the entrepreneurs to come forward,” he added.

Before the coronavirus hit Bangladesh, only two to three companies used to produce Hydroxychloroquine on a limited scale, but now at least 35 companies are producing it.

To end the crisis of PPE, the DGDA took the initiative to make its import duty free and now the import of raw materials for PPE has also been made duty free, said Mahbubur.

“Many companies are producing PPE locally and we are encouraging them by various means. We have authorised five labs to check the quality of the products both local and import,” he said.

He recommended that informative and positive reports regarding frontline fighters should be published in the mass media to encourage them.

The DGDA is working closely with the drug companies so that once a vaccine is developed, it can be made readily available in the country.

“We have the capacity to fill and finish 10 million doses of vaccine per month. We are trying to get the vaccine as soon as possible whenever an effective vaccine in the market,” he said.

The DGDA supervises and implements all the prevailing drug regulations in the country and regulates all activities related to import, procurement of raw and packaging materials.

Deaths leap after a lull

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The authorities handed over the bodies to family members without collecting samples for testing, officials said, adding that they didn’t have the capacity to test or store the bodies.

Since Saturday, 40 patients have died there.

“As the number of daily tests is inadequate, the daily case detection may not cross the 1000-mark,” Prof Ridwanur said.

“There must be many hidden cases across the country and they have not been isolated. But they are spreading the virus, nevertheless,” said the specialist.

Another expert from Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) said, “What’s happening is either mismanagement, or the DGHS is trying to hide the number of deaths, hoping to prove their competency to the high ups.”

COVID-19 SITUATION

At the daily briefing yesterday, Prof Nasima Sultana, additional director general (administration) of DGHS, said 130 patients cured in 24 hours, taking the total recovered patients to 1,910.

Unlike other days, she did not mention the day’s death toll. The DGHS mentioned the number of deaths in a press release hours later.

Of the 13 new victims, eight were

men, five women, six residents of the capital, three of Dhaka’s upazilas, and four of Chattogram division, she said.

Six of the deceased were over 60, four between 51 and 60, two between 41 and 50 and one between 11 and 20

The person aged between 11 and 20 was also a cancer patient, according to the DGHS press release.

Seventy-three percent of the people who died in the country from Covid-19 were men, 42 percent aged above 60, 27 percent aged between 51 and 60, 19 percent between 41 and 50, seven percent between 31 and 40, three percent between 21 and 30 and two percent under 10.

Dhaka continues to be the worst-affected region with almost 60 percent of the total cases.

Until May 1, around 54.7 percent of the cases were reported in Dhaka city.

Yesterday, the Center for Advanced Research in Sciences (CARS) at Dhaka University started the coronavirus testing, raising the total number of testing labs to 34.

In the 24 hours before 2:30pm yesterday, the 34 labs tested 5,867 swabs.

The 18 laboratories in Dhaka tested 3,888 samples and the 16 outside Dhaka tested 1,979. As of yesterday 105,513 people have been tested.