

Vaccine orders plummet amid coronavirus outbreak: CDC

AFP, Washington

Orders for vaccines against diseases such as measles have declined since a national emergency was declared in the United States because of the coronavirus pandemic, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Friday.

The number of vaccine doses ordered around the country has fallen sharply since mid-March, the CDC

said, citing data from the Vaccine Tracking System.

The study compared data from March 13 to April 19 of this year to the same period last year.

"There is a drop of 2.5 million doses of all routine non-influenza vaccines and 250,000 doses of measles-containing vaccines that appears to be the result of staying at home during the Covid-19 outbreak," the CDC said.

Peak in 3rd or last week

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By the end of June when the situation becomes tolerable, the curve will not flatten, he said.

The committee said that it will take quite some time before the downward curve will be flattened meaning there will be zero transmission of Covid-19 virus.

"But the vital thing is that if we can accept and implement the intervention level 1, 2, 3 and 4, then the peak period will be shortened, the peak time will not linger.

"Our prediction will be proved right if we can continue the interventions," Prof Monir said, "If we start withdrawing the interventions, then the prediction will not work."

Meanwhile independent experts called for increasing the number of tests across the country, to at least 20,000 per day to get a real picture. Besides, they called for no more relaxation of restrictions imposed by the government.

A member of the expert panel admitted saying: "It's true that we

could give more correct predictions if the number of tests could be increased."

Eight people died with coronavirus infections in the last 24 hours, taking the total number to 214, according to DGHS.

Besides, 636 people have tested positive for Covid-19 in the same period making the total number 13,770.

The government has already lifted restrictions on people gathering at mosques and shopping malls and other businesses are going to reopen from today on a limited scale.

Prof Muzaherul Huq, former adviser (Southeast Asia Region) of the WHO, said: "My clear opinion is that we won't be able to tell the correct rate of infection until we can increase the test number and spread the test facility across the country."

"We got confined at point—in between 5000 to 6000. We have to test at least 20,000 per day. The test should be done across the country," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

Epidemiological surveillance

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"We have been conducting epidemiological surveillance in and outside Dhaka. We are hopeful that we will be able to complete it within two to three weeks," said ASM Alamgir, principal scientific officer at IEDCR.

Asked when did they start the work and what was the sample size, he declined to provide any details.

Bangladesh entered into its 61st day yesterday ever since the first case of the coronavirus was detected in Dhaka on March 8. The surge in infections continued with 636 new cases reported yesterday, taking the total to 13,770.

Yesterday, the authorities also reported eight Covid-19 deaths, bringing the death toll to 214.

Amid the worsening coronavirus situation, the government has reopened factories and decided to reopen businesses and shopping malls on May 10 on a limited scale, apparently in a desperate attempt to bring the economy back on track, but without an epidemiological surveillance report from the IEDCR, the reference body of WHO in Bangladesh.

"Policy makers are not public health experts. So, the health officials should suggest them based on evidence. We are yet to hear about such epidemiological surveillance," said Prof Be-Nazir Ahmed, former director (disease control) of the DGHS.

Without epidemiological evidence, which is needed to check the infection rate and help generate immunity in

a particular community, relaxing the shutdown may be dangerous and may expedite the spread of the virus, Be-Nazir warned.

Expert also said an epidemiological surveillance can decipher how many of a representative group of people of a community have generated antibodies to fight the virus despite being infected.

Scientists then may extrapolate from there the magnitude of the pathogen's spread in the broader population, experts said.

Such surveillance could also shed light on how the virus transmitted among people, including what role seemingly less-affected groups, like children, have played in its dispersion, they said, adding that the IEDCR should focus more on surveillance.

"IEDCR needs to concentrate more on the ongoing epidemiological surveillance of Covid-19 for analysis, which is very important for epidemic control. It will give us a clear idea about the Covid-19 situation of the country," IEDCR consultant and epidemiologist Mushtaq Husain told The Daily Star.

Abul Kalam Azad, director general of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), also acknowledged it. "It is important and we have asked the IEDCR to concentrate more on research," he said.

He also said currently their projections are based on the trends of the identified cases.

"But to give an accurate picture, we need epidemiological surveillance."

Countries must return

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a media briefing from Geneva that all nations should focus on the fundamentals of the global coronavirus fight: scouting potential new infections, hunting them down, confirming them and then separating those afflicted, to save others from the disease.

"We seem...to be avoiding the uncomfortable reality that we need to get back to public health surveillance," Mike Ryan, the head of the WHO's health emergencies programme, said during a media briefing. "We need to go back to where we should have been months ago -- finding cases, tracking cases, testing cases, isolating people who are tested positive, doing quarantine for contacts."

WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus' concerns over a funding crunch come after US President Donald Trump last month told his administration to temporarily halt funding to the United Nations health agency. US officials are demanding a WHO overhaul, saying it mishandled the coronavirus crisis.

WHO's Ryan on Friday urged nations to stick together as the disease spreads from country to country, sometimes at different rates and with wide swings in death tolls. Ryan highlighted how Russia appears to be dealing with a "delayed epidemic" as a spike in confirmed new infections in recent days has catapulted it past France and Germany in total number of cases.

"Through solidarity we will win the fight and nobody is safe until everybody is safe", Ryan said. "There is a path out, but we must remain ever-vigilant, and we may have to have a significant alteration of our lifestyles until we get to a point where we have an effective vaccine."

There has been a slew of news in recent days about vaccine candidates, including announcements that tests in humans have begun with some trials expected by summer, though experts have warned a successful preventative treatment may still be many months away.

CORONAVIRUS APP

WHO plans to launch an app this month to enable people in under-resourced countries to assess whether

they may have the novel coronavirus, and is considering a Bluetooth-based contact tracing feature too, an official told Reuters on Friday.

The app will ask people about their symptoms and offer guidance on whether they may have Covid-19, the potentially lethal illness caused by the coronavirus, said Bernardo Mariano, chief information officer for the WHO. Other information, such as how to get tested, will be personalised according to the user's country.

Though the WHO will release a version on app stores globally, any government will be able to take the app's underlying technology, add features and release its own version on app stores, Mariano said in a phone interview.

India, Australia and the United Kingdom already have released official virus apps using their own technology, with common features including telling people whether to get tested based on their symptoms and logging people's movements to enable more efficient contact tracing.

Several countries are ramping up contact tracing, or the process of finding, testing and isolating individuals who crossed paths with an infectious individual. It is seen as vital to safely opening economies, and apps that automate parts of the process could accelerate efforts.

The WHO expects its app to draw interest in other countries, including some in South America and Africa where case numbers are rising. They may lack the technology and engineers to develop apps or be struggling to offer testing and education.

"The value is really for countries that do not have anything," Mariano said. "We would be leaving behind the ones that are not able to (provide an app), that have fragile health systems."

Engineers and designers, including some who previously worked at Alphabet Inc's Google and Microsoft Corp, have been volunteering for weeks to develop the new app with about five of them overseeing the process. They are designing it open-source on the hosting service GitHub, meaning code is open to public input.



Due to acute crisis of transport for shipping goods to districts from the capital, traders have started using package delivery service providers for the job. The photo taken on English Road in the capital shows packages scattered across the street as they are being loaded on to a truck of a courier service provider.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Fear grips mothers-to-be

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treatment at three hospitals although she had to run around for around nine hours at a stretch to get to those places.

Although Tania's delivery date was May 3, her water broke (amniotic membrane rupture) on that very day and she was in immediate need for hospitalisation for a safe delivery.

She was first refused by Mohammadpur Government Maternity Hospital, which has shut down its delivery facilities. The other two hospitals, Ad-Deen Hospital and Azimpur Maternity Hospital, refused to treat her as those suspected her to be Covid-19 positive.

By this time, Tania began feeling like she might not survive as her lower abdomen had hardened and she was feeling unwell, the report read.

The ongoing pandemic has also forced many pregnant women to skip their antenatal appointments, even if they were unwell or facing severe health complications.

While some are avoiding check-ups in fear of coming in contact with coronavirus patients, a large number of them are not being able to due to the unavailability of their ob-gyns.

Nujahat Jebin, who is in her 35th week of pregnancy and has been suffering from thalassemia, is currently facing a dire situation because her gynaecologist is currently unavailable.

"Since I have thalassemia, the doctor earlier said the baby isn't getting enough oxygen. To ensure that the baby gets oxygen, I needed to go to the clinic regularly, but now the clinic is so overcrowded.

"Besides, the movement of the baby

has also decreased and I have also felt a pain in my lower abdomen," said Jebin. "I don't know what's going on but I'm scared."

Fourteen weeks pregnant, Jannatul Ferdous needed to go to her check-ups scheduled this month, but she too couldn't make it due to the unavailability of her doctor.

"I also needed a change of medication, but I cannot contact my doctor. I needed the hepatitis B vaccine, but I feel so unsafe outside in the middle of this crisis," she said.

According to the interviewees, given the current global pandemic the world is facing, many obstetricians are increasing the interval between face-to-face visits and encouraging them with telemedicine. However, this is not a viable option for many, especially those who require close examination or tests.

Taslima Afrin, who is expecting to deliver her baby on the June 2, told this correspondent that she was supposed to do an ultrasonogram, check her haemoglobin level as she is anaemic, and take a random blood sugar test. "However, this is not possible over phone and I am now told to stay home," she said.

Priyanka Saha, another mother-to-be in Gaibandha, said she has had a severe cough for the past week and her antibiotics are not working properly.

"The doctor suggested seeing a chest specialist for this, which is not possible from here," said Priyanka, who has a history of a miscarriage.

Dr Nawsheen Sharmin Purobi, a renowned gynaecologist, however said that they have not been discouraging anyone to come to visit the hospitals and have been attending emergency

cases. However, we prefer dealing with it over phone or online platforms if the problem is not severe.

"Our patients also prefer not to visit due to the current situation. What is more surprising is that we are getting a lot of queries from patients all over the country on our online platform -- "Dr Purobi's Help Desk" (a Facebook Page)," she added.

She also suggested that pregnant women do not get stressed as it can have adverse impacts on the pregnancy, such as high blood pressure, high sugar level or premature contractions.

AKM Mohiul Islam, director general of family planning (DGFP) also believes that maternal health, such as, care during pregnancy, post-pregnancy and childbirth, are issues that demand special attention and treatment, and any interruption may increase risks.

A large number of pregnant women also said that they were discharged early from hospitals to limit the risk of inadvertent exposure and infection, while the hospitals' staffers and the obstetrics teams have been trying to minimise the number of people who enter the hospital.

Nazlee Shamima Ferdousi is also with child. She said she has planned to get admitted to hospital 13 days before her due date. "I'm lonely here due to the current situation. Both my mother and mother-in-law are outside the city and they cannot help me right now."

A number of mothers-to-be also noted that they were unable to do the necessary shopping for essentials, such as diapers, baby wipes, and formula milk, and are now facing difficulties to manage commodities.

Most city malls opt not to open

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Talking to this correspondent yesterday, leaders 14 other shopping centres in Dhanmondi area, including Gausia, Chadni Chak, Chistia, New Chistia, Noor Mansion, Dhanmondi Hawkers Market, Priyangan, Islami Mansion and Eastern Mallika, said they would not reopen as well.

Owners of wholesale markets in Gulistan, Phulbaria and Bangabazar areas stated the same.

Aarong, a popular destination for many to buy Eid dresses, however, yesterday decided to reopen some selected outlets. It said special health safety measures would be ensured and that the decision was taken to save the livelihood rural artisans and small entrepreneurs.

"To reduce health risk and ensure social distancing, Aarong has also, for the first time in Bangladesh, introduced an online booking system for customers who want to visit any shopping outlet. They can book their time slot at aarong.com and visit the outlet at their scheduled time for safe and comfortable shopping," Aarong said in a release.

Of its 21 outlets, two situated in Narayanganj city and Bashabo area of the capital, however, will remain closed as these two areas are considered as Covid-19 hotspots.

Dewan Aminul Islam Shahin said, "Following the government

announcement, we had decided to reopen the Dhaka New Market today to save our livelihood. But we see coronavirus cases are increasing every day. In such a situation, most shop owners have decided not to reopen their shops before Eid."

He also said the Dhaka Metropolitan Police and the health ministry gave them various instruction on ensuring social distancing and hygiene at the market, but those would be hard to follow at the market.

"All shoppers might not agree to follow these guidelines and an untoward situation may arise if shop employees ask them to do so," he said. Replying to a query, he said some 506 shops at the market employ some 3,000 people.

The DMP on Thursday came up with a set of directives following the government announcement. It said shoppers would be able to go to markets only if they were within two kilometres of their homes. The shoppers will have to carry ID cards or original copies of utility bills.

It also asked to install disinfection tunnels and thermal scanners at the entrance to each shopping mall.

Besides, the authorities of each shopping mall will have to ensure that no one enters the establishment without wearing masks.

According to the directives, no hawkers or temporary roadside shops

will be allowed.

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

Talking to this correspondent, Kamrul Hasan Babu, president of Dokan Malik Samity, Gausia Market, said apart from the fear of getting infected with coronavirus, shop owners of different markets in Dhanmondi area said it would not be possible for them to ensure all the guidelines were followed.

Mohammad Bablu, president, Ismail Mansion Market, said they would not be able to do business if they had to remain occupied in ensuring those guidelines.

"That's why most of the shop owners and leaders of different markets in a meeting today decided not to reopen their shops before Eid, although it will deal a blow to our livelihood and earnings," he said.

SHOPPING MALLS IN CTG

Meanwhile, owners of 12 large shopping malls in Chattogram on Friday decided that the malls will remain closed till May 31 to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

The decision was taken at a joint meeting of the shop owners' association and the traders' association.

(Mohammad Suman, our staff correspondent from Chattogram, contributed to this report)

Hundreds of repatriated Pakistanis test positive for virus

AFP, Islamabad

Hundreds of Pakistanis who were repatriated from the Middle East -- where many lost jobs amid coronavirus shutdowns and were living in cramped conditions -- have tested positive for Covid-19, officials said Friday.

Pakistan has so far brought about 20,000 nationals home, among them a large number of unskilled workers who had been labouring in Gulf nations only to see their jobs disappear as lockdowns slowed economic activity.

Of the 2,069 Pakistanis returning from the Middle East to the southern province of Sindh, more than 500 tested positive for the coronavirus, Murad Ali Shah, Sindh's chief

minister, told a press conference.

And in the northwestern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a senior government official told AFP that more than 200 of the 1,600 passengers repatriated to the city of Peshawar had tested positive.

According to the foreign office, about 4.5 million Pakistanis work in the Middle East.

In addition to the 20,000 who have already come back, around 110,000 more overseas Pakistanis have registered a desire to return home.

Pakistan has been chartering flights to bring back stranded nationals, as commercial flights into the country have been halted.

Labourers in many Gulf nations live in crowded dormitories or work camps where social distancing is

impossible.

During a briefing Thursday, Moeed Yusuf, the prime minister's special assistant on national security, said that on some flights as many as half the passengers were infected.

"Our ministry of foreign affairs has raised this issue with those countries and we are finding ways so it should not happen again," he said.

Citing economic pressures, Prime Minister Imran Khan on Thursday announced the easing of a nationwide lockdown, sparking fears coronavirus cases may increase dramatically.

More than 26,000 cases of Covid-19 have been confirmed so far, with the death toll at a relatively low 600 or so in the nation of about 215 million people.

Sudan extends Khartoum curfew to slow virus

AFP, Khartoum

Sudan extended a curfew in and around the capital Khartoum for 10 days from yesterday as coronavirus cases mount, state media reported.

The Sudanese health ministry has so far reported 1,111 Covid-19 cases including 59 deaths, with Khartoum state hardest hit.

Authorities initially imposed a curfew in Khartoum for three weeks from April 18. With its twin city Omdurman, the capital has a population of more than five million.

Nine out of 10

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Around 17.5 percent of all the detected Covid-19 patients in the country have recovered from their illness while 1.5 percent died, she said.

"With 313 in past 24 hours [until 2:30pm yesterday], a total of 2,414 patients have recovered from the disease. In terms of all concluded cases, recovery rate is 91.8 percent while the mortality rate is 8.2 percent," she said. **DHAKA CITY TOPS THE LIST OF COVID-19 CASES**

According to the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) website, Dhaka city continued to be the worst affected region in the country with a total 6,423 positive cases detected here so far.

It is more than 58 percent of all cases detected.

Collectively, more than 81 percent cases were detected in Dhaka division and 12 other districts.

With 1,177 positive cases until yesterday, industrial city Narayanganj continued to be the second worst affected district in the country, followed by Gazipur with 332 positive cases and Munshigonj with 212 cases.

Among other districts outside Dhaka division, the highest 212 positive cases were detected in Mymensingh followed by 207 in Chattogram.

Among the north Bengal districts, Rangpur district has 157 cases detected so far while all other districts in Rangpur and Rajshahi divisions have more or less 50 cases each.

2,329 inmates

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after taking opinions from the law ministry, recently ordered the prisons authorities to release 2,884 inmates who were jailed for one year or less for minor offences, but served months in jails.

Earlier, 555 prisoners were freed last week in two phases. Of them, 170 served six months behind bars, and the rest between three months and six months, jail sources said.

As per the home ministry's order, the prisons headquarters recommended releasing around 5,000 prisoners under three categories.

Under the first category, there were more than 3,000 prisoners who were sentenced to two-year imprisonment.

The second category included 1,413 life-sentenced prisoners who served more than 20 years in jail. Besides, there were 36 inmates with physical disabilities under the third category.

However, the list of 1,413 prisoners is being shortened.

Col Abrar said, "We are excluding inmates convicted of heinous crimes like murder, rape, abduction, throwing acid and in arms cases from the list. After exclusion, the number is now around 460. Preparation of the list is still under process."

There are around 90,000 prisoners in 68 jails across the country against the capacity of 41,244. Such a large number of prisoners is posing a high risk of coronavirus transmission inside the prisons.

Twenty-two prison guards, two inmates and a doctor of prisons have tested positive for Covid-19 so far since the first Covid-19 case was reported in the country on March 8.

RMG workers

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protesters refused to pay any heed to their request, said Shusanto Kumar, additional superintendent of Gazipur Industrial Police, adding that the situation was brought under control around 2:00pm.

Several factories in nearby areas were shut down fearing a spillover of the violence.

In Ashulia, around 4,000 agitating workers demanded that the decision to reduce 40 percent of their house rents be implemented.

The decision was taken at a meeting among industrial police, house owners and local union parishad authorities on Friday.

"If the decision comes into effect, we will accept the government decision regarding our salary," said the workers.

Earlier, to avert job cuts and temporary closures during Covid-19 outbreak, the government, on April 29, directed RMG factory owners to pay their workers 60 percent salary for April.

Asked about the workers' demand, a secretary at the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) said the decision of paying 60 percent salary was taken at a meeting on Thursday where representatives of two workers' unions, the BGMEA, and the government came to an understanding on this score.

The workers who have worked will receive 100 percent of their salaries, he said.

The BGMEA has requested all members not to lay off any worker in May.