

Canada parliament goes virtual during pandemic

AFP, Ottawa

Canada's parliament has gone virtual through the pandemic, assembling MPs across six time zones and giving a rare peek at Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's bookcase, a deer head and a stifled opposition.

Every Tuesday and Thursday over the past month 338 Canadian MPs logged into Zoom from home to question ministers in lieu of holding a daily in-person question period.

The first sessions were marred by glitches -- "Can you hear me now?" "There's an issue with the translation." "The minister is being cut off." "Please unclick your mute." "You might also hear my son, he doesn't sound too happy, in the background."

"This is a historic day," Speaker Anthony Rota said when it began, while admonishing MPs over sounds of camera clicks "not to post photos on the Internet of the screen," as per parliamentary rules.

A few others including the British and Latvian parliaments have also gone online to limit person-to-person spreading of the Covid-19 virus.

"We cannot be vectors for the virus," New Democrat MP Peter Julien told AFP, explaining why his party pushed for this arrangement to maintain democracy in a crisis.

"The only way to ask questions on behalf of constituents and hold government accountable without

endangering the public is a virtual parliament," he said.

Critics such as Democracy Watch co-founder Duff Conacher lamented that it has diminished the role of the official opposition, while the minority Liberal government of Trudeau uses daily press briefings to discuss policy.

"It's very difficult in these mass virtual sessions to put a minister or the prime minister on the spot," Conacher said, describing the sessions as "chaotic."

He also warned of the risk of abuse if parliamentary oversight is curtailed.

The official opposition Tories had from the start objected to the virtual confabs.

"Mr. Trudeau should not be using a pandemic to avoid accountability and oversight and should not be eliminating the role of the peoples' representatives," leader Andrew Scheer said Friday.

But the prime minister, with the backing of New Democrats and the Bloc Quebecois, had said it would be irresponsible to have regular sittings while public health officials urged social distancing.

Thirty MPs also meet each Wednesday in person -- striking "a balance that is yielding very good results," Trudeau said.

No legislation except emergency spending bills have been passed during the nationwide lockdown.

Big challenge

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in 16 coastal districts were evacuated from their homes and taken to 5,670 permanent and temporary cyclone shelters.

The state minister yesterday said officials would begin evacuation whenever the Met office issued a warning.

Shah Kamal, the secretary of the ministry, said, "We requested the Red Crescent to provide us with masks for the people who would go to the shelters."

SCHOOL, COLLEGE BUILDINGS NOT ENOUGH

The government should consider using all concrete structures in the region as shelters in order to make social distancing possible.

"Only the educational institutions will not be enough," said Mahmudul Islam, coordinator of Disaster Management Education Research and Training Network.

Prof AKM Shamsuzzaman, director at the National Institute of Laboratory Medicine and Referral Centre, said there were "very high" risks of a spread of the coronavirus during the evacuation from homes and at the shelters.

"We are asking everyone to maintain physical distancing. It must be maintained during the evacuation and at the shelter centres," he told The Daily Star.

The shelters must have masks, sanitisers, and proper hand washing facilities with soap for everyone, he said, adding that the coronavirus rules should be clearly communicated to the people.

Disaster management expert Gawher Nayeem Wahra said the government usually issued evacuation orders 36 to 48 hours before a landfall. "But this time, the orders should

not be issued any more than 10 hours in advance. To make that happen, the met office must observe the situation very carefully," he said.

Also, the areas that will be hit by the cyclone have to be precisely identified. For example, if the cyclone is likely to hit Satkhira and Bagerhat, evacuation orders should not be issued in Cox's Bazar, he added.

"We have seen such misplaced orders in the past," said Nayeem, member secretary of the Disaster Forum.

The risks of a potential super-spreading shelter will be reduced if the people's stay at the shelters are shortened and there are fewer people at the shelters.

He also added that the government should not distribute snacks at the shelters.

"Food distribution is tricky and often creates a lot of troubles that are not desired during this pandemic," he said, adding that people stay at the shelters for no longer than a few hours, and the dry food they bring from home would be enough.

AMPHAN

The deep depression over south-east of the Bay of Bengal that has intensified into a cyclone named Amphan on Saturday is likely to intensify and move to the coast.

In a cyclone bulletin issued last night, the Department of Meteorology asked all maritime ports including Chattogram, Cox's Bazar, Mongla and Payra to hoist local warning flag number four, meaning the ports were threatened by a storm with a wind speed of 51-61 km/hour, but the threat is not enough to justify extreme precautionary measures.

The Met office also asked all fishing boats and trawlers to remain close to the coast.

one district to another or one upazila to another.

Yesterday, a large number of people left the capital for their village homes by trucks, auto-rickshaws, pick-up vans and cars, according to witnesses.

Many vehicles were seen lining up at Aricha and Mawa ferry terminals in the morning.

Around 5,000 people crossed the Aricha terminal till yesterday noon, and most of them travelled by pick-up vans, motorbikes and auto-rickshaws, said officials of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation.

Asked, Rifat Rahman Shamim, superintendent of police in Manikganj, said they set up checkpoints at the Aricha terminal at noon.

"We are not allowing motorbikes, auto-rickshaws, cars or any other vehicles to cross. The only exception is the vehicles engaged in emergency services," he added.

Talking to this newspaper, Khandokar Golam Faruk, DIG of the Chattogram Range, said, "All the 11 superintendents of police in the Chattogram Division have been asked to enhance surveillance and install checkpoints to restrict movement of both people and vehicles."

"We won't allow anyone to travel from one district to another during the Eid holidays," he added.

Abu Bakar Siddique, additional deputy commissioner of Chattogram Metropolitan Police, said they already set up checkpoints at five key points in the port city to restrict movement of people and vehicles.

"The restrictions have been put in place today [yesterday] and will remain until further notice," he added.

KH Mahid Uddin, DIG of the Khulna Range, said, "No one will be allowed to travel from one district to another..."

"Necessary measures have already been taken in this regard," he added.



A man getting his hair cut at a shop in Chattogram's Gol Pahar area yesterday. Despite extending the nationwide shutdown till May 30, the government has allowed shopping malls and markets to start business from May 10 after a month and a half's closure and that has seen many salons reopening. PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Second wave if mistake repeated

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receive nearly 29,000 Bangladeshi workers from Middle Eastern countries, especially from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq, in the next couple of weeks.

Of the 29,000, Kuwait will send 4,500, Saudi Arabia 4,262 and Oman will send nearly 1,000 Bangladeshi citizens, according to the foreign minister.

Speaking to The Daily Star recently, Momen said Bangladesh had requested different countries not to send back the Bangladeshi workers in the middle of the Covid-19 outbreak. But they didn't pay heed to the request.

Dr Shamima, an official at the health desk in Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA), told The Daily Star on Thursday that Kuwait has already started repatriating Bangladeshi workers.

She said 311 workers, who were in different prisons or deportation camps of Kuwait, returned to Dhaka on April 12 and all of them were sent into home quarantine as they showed health certificates saying they did not have Covid-19.

Health experts, however, raised questions about the certificates.

Prof Muzaherul Huq, former adviser (Southeast Asia Region) of the World Health Organization, said passengers with certificates stating negative test results may also be infected if the virus is in its incubation period.

"Therefore, we should not repeat the same mistake we made at the beginning by allowing Bangladeshi expatriates to be home-quarantined, as it was disastrous for us. We must learn from the mistake," he observed.

Officials at the health desk at HSIA said that at present, there are only three places with the bed capacity to keep around 700 people coming from abroad in institutional quarantine.

Harvest all paddy now

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and Barishal -- account for 10 percent of the total acreage of Boro, the main crop that has roughly 55 percent share in the annual rice production estimated at 3.64 crore tonnes in 2018-19.

"We are requesting farmers through loudspeakers to harvest crops with 80 percent maturity quickly. We have also asked them to use reapers and combine harvesters to do it as quickly as possible," said DAE Director of Field Services Wing Alhaz Uddin Ahmed.

The DAE said farmers already harvested 86 percent of the Boro crop in the southeast division of Chattogram and southwest division of Khulna. The southern coastal division of Barishal saw a harvest of 62 percent of the Boro paddy grown on 1,25,000 hectares, according to Alhaz.

"We expect that maximum crop would be harvested before the cyclone hits," he said.

Agronomists said it is not clear how much crop might get damaged by the cyclone, which may cross the coastal belt in the early hours of Wednesday (May 20).

Mirza Hasanuzzaman, professor of the Department of Agronomy at Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University, said as lower yielding varieties of paddy are of lower heights, there was possibility of inundation damaging the crops.

"If the cyclone hits, it may cause a major loss of paddy, which mostly may be 20-30 percent of the standing crop yield," he said.

Md Shahjahan Kabir, director general of Bangladesh Rice Research Institute said the ratio of the immature paddy on the field is insignificant. There may be immature paddy in Rangpur, the northwest division.

The extent of the damage would be high had the crop been half-ripen, he said.

Kabir said if the cyclone hits the southwest coastal district of Satkhira, the loss would not be too major.

"I hope farmers would be able to harvest their crop anyhow," he said.

Mazharul Aziz, project director of Agro-Meteorological Information Systems Development Project at the DAE, said, until now, the forecast says there might be heavy rainfall and wind.

"But a cyclone is ever-changing. So, what the effects might be is not clear yet. We will update our advisory again tomorrow [today]," he added.

In its advisory, the DAE also suggested farmers harvest mature

They are Ashkona Hajj Camp, Diabari, and Brac Learning Centre in Uttara.

WHY A SECOND PEAK

Explaining the possibility of another peak, a member of the government committee said, "We have had a bitter experience in the recent past by allowing migrant Bangladeshis to go into home quarantine. Almost nobody cared to stay home, let alone follow proper health guidelines."

Besides, in socio-economic conditions like ours, most people don't have facilities at their homes to ensure that the guidelines are being followed, he added.

"To tell the truth, home quarantine is not practical and feasible for many of our people."

Another member of the committee said, "Earlier, we predicted the number of new cases was likely to come down to a tolerable level by the end of June, unless the restrictions are relaxed too early."

"But now we think the return of the huge number of Bangladeshi prisoners from the Middle East will wreak havoc unless they are kept in mandatory institutional quarantine."

Wishing anonymity, he also said, "Many of us cannot follow quarantine guidelines at home. This is because most people simply don't have accommodations that provide separate rooms and bathrooms for those quarantined."

Moreover, he said, there is hardly any surveillance infrastructure in place to track whether the said person is indeed maintaining self-quarantine, which renders the whole process doubtful.

He also said that in different countries, including Vietnam, no passenger was allowed to stay in home quarantine.

The committee added that it will be

quite some time before there is zero transmission.

Prof Muzaherul Huq said once those expats return, they must be sent to institutional quarantine for 14 days.

"Home quarantine is not practical, feasible and reliable in our country. Here a person [suspect] can roam around while at home quarantine," he added.

WAY OUT

Muzaherul said the authorities should do rapid dot blots and separate the migrant workers, who would test positive, to avoid further transmission. Then they would have to go through the PCR test too.

The rest, who would test negative in the rapid test diagnosis, would have to remain in institutional quarantine for two weeks, he added.

Dr Liaquat Ali, also an educationist, said the governments should immediately engage respective communities to transform educational institutions into institutional quarantine facilities.

He also said the government should create public awareness in this regard, adding, "If we do not begin the process right now, the situation will turn grave."

According to a May 13 report by National Disaster Response Coordination Center, 615 establishments across the country with a capacity of 30,955 people were ready for institutional quarantine.

A total of 2,27,642 people were sent into quarantine till May 13, of which 2,14,701 were in home quarantine and 12,9,41 in institutional quarantine, says the report.

On the same date, 45,281 people were already quarantined -- 41,349 at home and 3,932 at institutional facilities.

Meanwhile, total of 1,82,361 were released from all kinds of quarantine till that date.

land," said Alamgir Hossain, a farmer of Noihati village in Khulna's Rupsha upazila.

In the Chattogram region, 86 percent of Boro paddy has been harvested, according to DAE officials.

Boro paddy was cultivated on 2.30 lakhs hectares of land in Chattogram, Cox's Bazar, Noakhali, Feni and Laxmipur districts.

Of these, paddies on some 2 lakhs hectares have already been harvested, said Md Nasir Uddin, deputy director of DAE Chattogram office.

"On loudspeakers, we urged the farmers to harvest the remaining paddy with two or three days," he told The Daily Star.

(Our Correspondents from Barishal, Pirojpur, Patuakhali, Khulna, Bagerhat, Chattogram and Noakhali contributed to this report.)

ICCB hospital

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beds. It also has at least 400 more portable oxygen cylinders.

On April 9, the minister made the decision of setting up the hospital public.

Visiting the hospital on April 29, he said more than 20,000 coronavirus isolation beds were ready across the country.

Plasma therapy for coronavirus treatment is also underway. Remdesivir medicine is also being produced in the country. The medicine is being stocked by the government, the minister added.

He said a letter was sent to all government and private hospitals for compulsory treatment of general patients.

The minister also requested the people not to hide any information if there were any Covid-19 symptoms.

About the government decision to ease the shutdown, the minister said when there was an emergency, the government enforced the shutdown and when it was needed to relax it. The government was making decisions considering all sides.

If the people follow health rules properly, there will be relief from economic crisis as well as coronavirus, he added.

The minister also thanked Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for her timely decisions.

Second fire ravages Rohingya camp in a week

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

The Rohingya settlement in Ukhiya upazila of Cox's Bazar caught on fire for the second time in a week yesterday.

The fire that broke out around 1:00am at Kutupalang camp-5 gutted over a hundred makeshift households, some NGO-run primary schools and a health centre, said firefighters.

Mohammad Emdadul Islam, station officer of Ukhiya fire service, said they managed to control the fire after one and a half hours of frantic effort.

The fire originated from a gas cylinder, he further said, adding that the fire spread rapidly as the camp was densely populated.

This incident happened just four days after a devastating fire at Lambasia area of the same camp that burnt down over 100 makeshift houses.

Long queues as Thai malls reopen after virus shutdown

AFP, Bangkok

Shoppers flocked to Thailand's top-end malls yesterday, eager for retail therapy as shopping centres reopened in a gradual easing of restrictions to revive the virus-ravaged economy.

Hundreds of masked customers passed through temperature checks, disinfection stations, and had their photos taken before they were allowed into plush malls in Bangkok.

In the main downtown shopping district, Central World touted a "new normal" of doing business on posters, while screens on the mall's exterior declared "We are open".

The shopping centre re-launch comes with Thailand's infection numbers slowing in recent weeks -- authorities announced three new cases yesterday, with the total at just over 3,000.

Shopper Taewich Penpattakul said he was "not really worried" about contracting Covid-19 because of Thailand's low caseload.

"Mentally, it makes me feel better that all the malls are now opened," the 23-year-old told AFP.

Customers and businesses were advised to adhere to restrictions, which include limits on the number of people allowed in retail spaces and a ban on alcohol sales in restaurants. Cinemas, however, remain closed.

The food court -- often the most popular part of Thai shopping centres -- filled up quickly, and a mobile robot roamed around monitoring people's temperatures.

70pc

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On the other hand, record shows that one-fifth of total 22,268 infected people are aged over 50 years.

The infection rate is higher among the young people in the country though the percentage of death is lower than aged people.

Till May 16, the total number of Covid-19 positive cases was 22,268 and half of them were aged between 21 years and 40 years.

At the briefing, Nasima suggested senior citizens to restricting their movement and taking extra care of their health.

The DGHS ADG also asked the people who have critical ailments like cancer, kidney or respiratory problems to remain more cautious during this period.

Meanwhile, 256 Covid-19 patients recovered in 24-hours since Saturday. The total number of recovered patients now stands at 4,373, the DGHS official added.

The recovery rate is around 19.64 percent while the death rate from the infection is 1.47 percent, she said.

A total of 8,114 samples were tested in 41 labs across the country since Saturday morning and 175,408 samples were so far tested, she added.

In the past 24 hours, a total of 276 people have been put under isolation while 74 have been released throughout the country.

Currently, a total of 3,248 people are under isolation, Dr Nasima added.

The country detected first Covid-19 case on March 08 and recorded its first death on March 18.

Some govt officials

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collect rice from agents or middlemen.

Wishing to be unnamed, an ACC official said there was nexus between the suppliers and procurement officials and it would be very difficult to find out the culprits unless the farmers speak out.

He also requested the deprived rice cultivators to complain by calling the ACC's hotline.

Last month, the ACC filed 15 cases against 20 people, including 14 representatives of the local government, for their alleged involvement in the misappropriation of about 54,000 kg subsidised rice allocated for the poor and vulnerable people.