

UK gov't boosts vaccine funding as daily virus deaths fall

AFP, London

Britain on Sunday reported 170 more coronavirus deaths -- its lowest number since late March, when lockdown restrictions were introduced, although the figures from Northern Ireland were not included.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson meanwhile acknowledged public frustration with the restrictions imposed to fight the virus.

The deaths take the government's official rolling tally of fatalities, which includes all positive cases after tests, to 34,636 -- the second-highest in the world.

Broader official data, which includes suspected deaths, is more than 36,000, although ministers say the country has passed the peak and there is a downward trend in cases.

Reporting is typically lower at weekends and business secretary Alok Sharma said technical problems meant Northern Ireland had not been included in the latest figures.

Sharma meanwhile announced tens of millions of pounds in extra funding to develop a coronavirus vaccine, which could see 30 million doses available in Britain by September.

An additional £84 million (\$102 million, 94 million euros) would be made available to "accelerate" efforts to trial and mass-produce a Covid-19 vaccine, he said.

Unveiling the new funding commitments at the daily Downing Street briefing, Sharma said Britain was home to two of the world's "frontrunners to develop a vaccine".

The projects, at Oxford University and Imperial College London, have already received £47 million in state

aid, said Sharma.

Both were making "good progress" at "unprecedented speed", he added.

Participants in the first clinical trials of the Oxford vaccine received their doses earlier this week. Imperial was set to start its tests in June and again in October.

Oxford had finalised a global licensing agreement with global pharmaceutical firm AstraZeneca for the commercial manufacturing of its vaccine, Sharma said.

"This means that if the vaccine is successful, AstraZeneca will work to make 30 million doses available by September for the UK as part of the agreement to deliver 100 million doses in total," he added.

"The UK will be first to get access," he added, noting it would also work to ensure the vaccine could be made available "to developing countries at the lowest possible cost".

The business secretary also announced a £93 million funding boost to finish building a specialist "manufacturing and innovation" vaccine centre, a year ahead of schedule.

Under construction in Oxfordshire, south central England, it is now set to open in mid-2021. It will have the capacity to produce enough vaccine doses to serve the British population within six months, the government said.

The new funding took government funding of vaccine development to £250 million, said Sharma. But he warned "there are no certainties".

"We may never find a successful coronavirus vaccine," he added.



Farmers hurriedly harvest paddy in a field in Jhalakathi's Kandargati village yesterday, fearing that the crops may be destroyed by approaching Amphan, a cyclonic storm.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

Virus deaths surge, new cases too

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district and upazila level, he said.

Professor Be-Nazir Ahmed, former director (disease control) at the health and family welfare ministry, also gave similar opinion.

According to official data, more than 10,000 people got infected with the deadly virus over the last nine days. One in every seven suspected cases tested positive for Covid-19 during this period.

The first coronavirus case was detected in the country on March 8.

Talking to this newspaper on Thursday, Dr Liaquat Ali, a medical scientist and member of an expert committee, said, "We submitted a report to the DGHS saying the Covid-19 outbreak may reach its peak in the third or fourth week of this month and the situation would remain unchanged for almost two weeks, or until the first week of June."

The government formed the eight-member committee in late March to supervise, monitor and support its efforts to combat the deadly virus.

On May 9, the number of novel coronavirus cases was 636. It rose to 887 the following day, and crossed 1,000-mark a day later.

Amid the rise in Covid-19 cases, some shopping malls and clothing stores reopened on May 10 following a government decision. Since then, movement of people as well as traffic on roads have increased.

"Obviously, the relaxation of restrictions is one of the main reasons

behind the rise in Covid-19 cases," said Muzaherul.

Since May 10, the health department has tested 58,489 samples and found 8,498 of those positive for the virus.

But in terms of testing coverage, Bangladesh still lags behind several countries in South Asia.

Official data shows Bangladesh has so far been able to test only 1,143 out of every one million people in the country. The number is 1,500 in neighbouring India and 1,600 in Pakistan.

And 122 out of every one million people in Bangladesh have been infected with the virus, and it saw two deaths per million people.

On the other hand, one-fifth of the infected people have so far recovered from the disease.

HIGH NUMBER OF CASES IN CAPITAL

The capital has seen a steady rise in Covid-19 cases over the last few weeks.

The number of infected people in the city stood at 9,565 yesterday, according to the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research.

The number was 6,162 on May 08 and 3,973 on May 01.

At an online briefing yesterday, Prof Dr Nasima Sultana, additional director general (administration) of the Directorate General of Health Services, said that of the dead, 12 were from Dhaka, seven from Chattogram, one from Sylhet and the other from Rajshahi.

So far 4,585 patients have recovered

from the disease, and the recovery rate was 19.21 percent, added the DGHS official.

EXPERTS' ADVICE

Experts say the government should bring changes in its strategy to fight Covid-19 and give district civil surgeons more responsibility for tackling the deadly virus in their areas.

"Since they [civil surgeons] are health experts, they know what steps are required. In this battle, they will need support from deputy commissioners and superintendents of police," said Muzaherul.

He suggested that the government should divide the country into three zones -- green, yellow and red. The districts having less than a hundred Covid-19 cases each will be put in the green zone, the ones with 100-300 cases in the yellow zone and those with more than 300 cases in the red zone.

The infected people in all the three zones would be kept at institutional facilities and their movement would be restricted, he mentioned.

In the green zone, restrictions on academic and economic activities would be relaxed, whereas the red zone will be kept under complete lockdown, and markets will be kept open for only three hours a day, he said.

In case of the yellow zone, the areas where Covid-19 cases were detected would be under lockdown, but other areas would see a relaxation of restrictions, added Muzaherul.

Headless of risks

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be restricted from May 17-May 28 across the country. The circular also said that no one would be allowed to leave the city of their work during the period. The local administration and law enforcers were supposed to enforce the restrictions.

Police on Sunday stepped up measures to restrict the movement of people. They set up check posts across the country to prevent people from travelling from one district to another during the eid unless there is an emergency.

But the number of people leaving Dhaka increased yesterday.

Eid-ul-Fitr will be celebrated on May 24 or 25, subject to the sighting of the moon.

CROWDING AT FERRY TERMINALS

The number of people leaving Dhaka has been increasing since Friday, a day after the government announced the extension of the eid holidays.

Ferry operators on the Shimulia-Kathalbari route said they have been transporting several thousand people across the Padma every day this week.

The authorities reduced the number of ferries from 14 to just four early yesterday to prevent crowding. But from 6:00am to 10:00am, the operators had to carry only people across the river because there was no room for vehicles, said an employee.

As the day progressed and the crowd became larger, the authorities suspended the services around 3:00pm.

The services didn't resume as of 9:00pm.

Ferry terminal staffers said there were thousands of people there.

At Paturia and Dauldia terminals, there were similar pictures.

As the number of small vehicles increased in the last few days, the authorities stopped transporting small vehicles from 11:00pm on Sunday, Zillur Rahman, BIWIC deputy general manager at the terminal, told this newspaper.

As the number of small vehicles kept increasing, they stopped operation of all five ferries from 11:00am yesterday, he said. "We will resume operation after getting permission from higher authorities and will only carry goods-laden vehicles now."

Rifat Rahman Shamim, superintendent of police in

Manikganj, said the movement of people could not be controlled.

Police on Sunday set up a check-post at Golra on Dhaka-Aricha highway in Manikganj, he told our Manikganj correspondent. But, people have been reaching Paturia Ghat at night, using bypass roads, he added.

The terminals witnessed similar crowds when the government on March 23 announced the shutdown from March 26.

DHAKA-CTG HIGHWAY The long tailback from Eliotganj to Daudkandi started yesterday morning and the situation became normal around 4:00pm.

As the number of private vehicles increased, police intensified their checking activities, causing the gridlock, reports our Cumilla correspondent.

Abdullah Al Mamun, officer in charge of Daudkandi Highway Police Station, said they have been working to maintain the "lockdown" strictly. Vehicles carrying goods and emergency transports were only allowed to move towards Dhaka.

Lorry driver Shafikul Islam, however, said when police forced the cars to return to Dhaka, they caused the jam.

WHAT HEALTH EXPERTS SAY Prof Dr Shah Monir Hossain, one of the eight members of a government-formed expert committee to supervise, monitor and support the coronavirus response, said: "It's a clear indication that we are going towards a worse situation."

"In a nutshell, I can tell you that the way people... are returning to their village homes... we are heading towards a crisis."

The government should immediately take measures to stop the flood of people leaving Dhaka, he added.

Prof Muzaherul Huq, former World Health Organisation regional adviser for Southeast Asia, said, "I think the death rate from coronavirus may increase if the government failed to prevent people from going to their homes."

"We are yet to know who tested positive or negative for Covid-19. That's why a sea of people, especially from the hotspots, going back to their villages, poses serious risk to others," he said.

Scientists, health officials

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Contacted, health officials said they started working on it, but had stumbled due to lack of available information.

IEDCR consultant and epidemiologist Mushtaq Husain said, "We are collecting data and the work is progressing."

He added that the government officials' predictions were based on analyses of daily new cases, number of tests, and mortality rate.

"But yes, R naught gives a very good direction in when to do what. The work is going on and we are hopeful of getting results soon," he said.

Experts say R-naught meant the number of new infections estimated to result from a single case. If R0 is 2.5, then one infected person might infect, on average, 2.5 others. The 2.5 others may infect another set of people at the same rate.

An R0 below 1 suggests that there are fewer new cases and that the restrictions can be lifted. An R0 above 1 suggests that the number of cases is growing and that more restrictions should be in order.

According to reports, Italy recently found out that its social and economic restrictions had pushed the virus's R0 down to 0.8. France estimated that timely lockdowns pushed R0 down to 0.5 from 3.3. And India estimates its R0 to have declined to 1.36 from 1.55.

Prof Iqbal Arslan, a member of the national technical committee on covid-19, said it is always wise to follow the global practice, because of their wide range of experiments.

"But in some cases, countries can customise the global practices. If we don't follow the global practice, then certainly it will create problems," he said regarding R naught.

Cops grapple with Covid-19

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Of the dead, eight were discharging duty in Dhaka Metropolitan Police areas. The infected rate also remains higher in DMP areas with around 1,097 till yesterday, according to officials.

As the Central Police Hospital is struggling to deal with the huge number of patients, police authorities have booked Impulse Hospital to treat its members.

Of the infected, 56 are from the diplomatic security division of DMP and most have started recovering and getting ready to resume duty. Rajon Kumar Saha, assistant commissioner of the division, told The Daily Star yesterday.

The division's high officials have been trying to boost police personnel's immunity by providing protein-rich diets regularly in the barracks, mess and hospitals, said MD Ashraful Islam, deputy commissioner of the division.

Around 32 officials of Gulshan Division of DMP tested Covid-19 positive.

"A number of police officials were infected while working in the field. We are communicating with the infected officials regularly and providing them

with fruits full of vitamin and minerals so that they do not lose mental strength in this time of crisis," said Sudip Chakrabarty, deputy commissioner of Gulshan Division of DMP.

On May 9, different police units formed "special teams" to visit and inquire about the health of Covid-19 positive colleagues while maintaining social distancing.

Meanwhile, of the infected Ansar members, 193 contracted the virus while discharging duty in Dhaka and 29 in other districts.

Of them, 77 had been on duty at the parliament and 90 in the DMP areas, Mehnaz Tabassum Rabin, deputy director of the force, told The Daily Star yesterday.

So far, one Ansar member, Abdul Mazid, who was carrying out his duties at Bhatara Police Station under DMP, died from Covid-19 infection on May 11.

Besides, 457 Ansar members remain in quarantine as they either came into contact with infected members or exhibited Covid-19-like symptoms, she said.

The first Ansar member tested positive for Covid-19 on April 10.

Mehnaz said they have already

taken measures including providing protective equipment to their members and also taking care of the infected members in hospitals so that they can recover and remain mentally strong.

The outbreak has also impacted the department of prisons, with around 24 prison guards and two inmates testing Covid-19 positive till yesterday, according to department sources.

Besides, around 309 more people remain in quarantine, including 242 inmates across the country who have exhibited Covid-19-like symptoms, Md Monzur Hossain, assistant inspector general of department of prison headquarters, told The Daily Star yesterday.

The prisons department earlier arranged isolation units for inmates inside jails in Kishoreganj, Madaripur, Pirojpur, Sylhet, Feni and Dinajpur districts, according to a home ministry report.

Prison officials said they remain on high alert and have taken all necessary steps, like keeping the compound clean, using disinfect spray regularly and keeping new inmates on 14-day quarantine before allowing them into the regular cells.

Amphan may be as bad as Sidr

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50 lakh in cash, Tk 31 lakh for children's food, Tk 28 lakh for fodders for livestock to support the people on the coastal belt during their stay at the shelters.

"From our experience after Cyclone Bulbul and Foni, we can say it takes seven to eight hours to evacuate 20 lakh people from their homes and take them to the shelters," the state minister said.

Law enforcement agencies will help people living on chars and in island areas and bring them to the mainland today.

Volunteers were using loudspeakers and urging people to move to the shelters, reports our correspondents from Khulna and Barishal divisions. Already more than two thousand people have moved to cyclone shelters in Satkhira's Gabura.

Zohora Khatun, 60, a survivor of Sidr, which killed over four lakh people in Bangladesh, moved to Chadnimbukh MM High School yesterday afternoon.

"We have moved here after hearing the announcement about the cyclone on loudspeaker," she said over telephone yesterday evening.

Many, however, don't want to leave their houses, leaving behind their livestock and poultry, while others complained that the shelters were in bad condition.

Imtiaz Uddin, a fisherman of Dakkhin Bedkashi village in Koyra upazila, told The Daily Star that they were the most vulnerable and affected people in any cyclone due to poor embankment.

"If I leave home and go to a shelter, where will my two cows and 10 ducks go? The cyclone shelter is two and a half kilometers away from my home," said Imtiaz, a survivor of Sidr and Aila, two severe cyclones that hit the Bangladesh coast in 2007 and 2008.

"My wife and mother will go to the shelter tomorrow [today] if this cyclone is that bad or if any instructions come from the administration," he said.

Uttam Mondal, of Sutorkhali village in Dacope upazila, told The Daily Star that people of the village usually do not go to shelters due to their poor environment.

"Almost all shelters are dilapidated and most of the windows and gates are damaged. Very few locals go to shelters," said Uttam, adding that there is no privacy for women there either.

"If any major crisis comes, I will go to the shelter with my father," he said.

Over 50,000 people in Patuakhali's coastal area are fearing a sudden surge due to the storm and that some area like Charipara, Kuakata, Lotachapli and Dulsar under Kolapara upazila may be

submerged.

Around a 500-kilometer-long embankment built to protect those areas has been damaged and its repair work is still going on.

"The flood protection dam has been damaged in our area. We fear that water will come rushing through this breach of the dam. And our whole village may go under water," said Abdur Rahim of Charipara village.

Several hundred people on that remote island of Dhalchar have already been evacuated.

"In the district, there are 21 risky remote islands, on which around three lakh people are living. Most of them don't want to go to the cyclone shelters. But we will try to bring in as many as possible [to the shelters]," said Mohammed Masud Alam Siddique, deputy commissioner of Bhola.

GETTING CLOSER

Amphan, a Thai word meaning ambition or strength, was located 940km southwest from Payra, 955km southwest from Mongla, 990km away from Cox's Bazar and 1,045km from Chattogram at 9:00pm yesterday.

"If it does not weaken before making the landfall, it could be worse than Cyclone Sidr," said Samarendra Karmakar, a retired director of the Bangladesh Meteorological

US tells China not to interfere with its journalists in HK

AFP, Washington

The US has warned China against interfering with American journalists working in Hong Kong, as a row between the two countries escalated.

The two sides have expelled each other's reporters in tit-for-tat moves over recent months as they trade barbs over press freedom and the coronavirus pandemic, with US President Donald Trump threatening to impose fresh trade tariffs.

"It has recently come to my attention that the Chinese government has threatened to interfere with the work of American journalists in Hong Kong," US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement Sunday.

"These journalists are members of a free press, not propaganda cadres."

Pompeo did not explicitly criticize China or give specific examples of what he was referring to, but the statement is the latest US response after Beijing expelled more than a dozen American reporters.

"Any decision impinging on Hong Kong's autonomy and freedoms as guaranteed under the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law would inevitably impact our assessment of One Country, Two Systems and the status of the territory," Pompeo said, referring to the arrangement under which Hong Kong was handed back to China from Britain in 1997.

It is designed to guarantee rights and freedoms in the semi-autonomous city.

"Hong Kong affairs are purely China's internal affairs," China said yesterday, without directly addressing or denying the allegations from Pompeo.

"No foreign government, organization, or individual has the right to interfere," foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told reporters at a regular press briefing.

Zhao also accused the US of "escalating its crackdown on the Chinese media" and "seriously interfering with the normal reporting activities of the Chinese media in the US."

BCGMEA asks govt

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the salaries for March, except these 46 factories.

"We have asked the authorities of these factories to sit with the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments now and settle their dues before closing their factories," said a senior executive at BCGMEA seeking anonymity.

But since these factories have not cleared March salaries, they would not be eligible to avail interest-free loan from the government's stimulus package for the garment sector.

It is one of the major conditions that borrowing companies need to meet for obtaining loans from the stimulus package.

Workers who have been demonstrating in Ashulia, Savar, Gazipur and Narayanganj mostly belong to these 46 factories.

Anisul Awwal, director general of the Central Fund, said the money from the central fund would be allocated only to the factories that were forced to be shut due to the coronavirus fallout.

"We do not allocate any financial assistance for any open factory," he told The Daily Star over the phone.

Anisul said upon receiving the list of 46 factories, he held a meeting with various stakeholders at the ministry on Sunday.

The meeting, however, ended without any decision on releasing fund for the factories in question.

So far Tk 210 crore has been deposited in this fund of which some Tk 90 crore has been spent, he said.

The Central Fund authorities will hold another meeting this week to take a decision about the fund allocation to these 46 units, he said.

Department.

Currently, the wind speed is between 225km to 245km.

In its special bulletin, the Bangladesh Meteorological Department said the cyclone may intensify further and may cross Bangladesh coast between Khulna and Chattogram early tomorrow, which could, however, be delayed to tomorrow evening.

The sea will remain very high near the eye of the cyclone, the bulletin said. The met office asked the Chattogram and Cox's Bazar port authorities to hoist signal number six, while Mongla and Payra port authorities were asked to hoist signal number seven, which means those ports will experience a severe storm.

The coastal districts of Satkhira, Khulna, Bagerhat, Jhalakathi, Pirojpur, Barguna, Patuakhali, Bhola, Barishal, Laxmipur, Chandpur, Noakhali, Feni, Chattogram and their shore islands and chars will suffer the worst of the storm, while low-lying areas of those districts could be inundated.

All fishing boats have been asked to take immediate shelter until further notice.

(Our correspondents from Khulna, Barishal, Bhola, Patuakhali, Bagerhat, Pirojpur and Noakhali contributed to the report.)