

Airlines prepare

FROM PAGE 1
operate six flights to Chattogram, three to Saidpur and one to Sylhet every day.

Novoair head of sales and marketing Mesbahul Islam said they would operate three flights to Chattogram, three to Saidpur and one to Sylhet daily.

CAAB Chairman Air Vice Marshall M Mafidur Rahman said to operate the domestic flights, all the airlines must adhere to the health guidelines issued by his office.

Last week, the CAAB prepared a guideline with directions to the airlines on how the flights would be operated following all health instructions and social distancing directives after the withdrawal of the current suspension.

According to the guideline, all airlines have to disinfect their aircraft every time before carrying passengers.

They will have to keep at least 30 percent seats vacant on each flight to ensure social distancing by keeping at least an empty seat between two passengers if they are not from the same family.

All staffers of airlines will have to wear masks, gloves and disposable head caps while dealing with passengers at the check-in counters while cabin crew will wear N95 or equivalent protective facial masks, goggles, disposable rubber gloves.

Staffers will have to change their facial masks after every four hours, said the guideline.

Crew members will avoid close contact with the passengers and provide only the necessary in-flight services.

No food and drinks will be served during the flights with an airtime of less than one and a half hours.

Normal meals can be served to passengers during medium and long-haul flights while all types of baby foods will be allowed to be carried.

Passengers' body temperature will be measured and they have to stand in queues in front of the check-in counters and boarding gates maintaining social distancing.

About the seat planning, it further instructed that the front or the last row of seats on each flight must remain vacant for carrying suspected coronavirus patients.

Apart from the country's main aviation hub Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka, the CAAB also asked officials of the country's other two international airports in Chattogram and Sylhet and all domestic airports to carry out disinfecting activities on a regular basis.

The government had imposed a ban on international flights on March 16 and on all domestic routes on March 25 to contain the spread of Covid-19.

STATE MINISTER'S MESSAGE

In a video message, Mahub Ali said: "I urge all air passengers to enjoy your travel following all health regulations as well as maintaining social distancing."

The government on Thursday decided to resume domestic flight operations on a limited scale from June 1 but extend the ongoing ban on international routes, except for China, till June 15 to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

M Mohibul Haque, senior secretary at the civil aviation ministry, on Thursday said after observing the situation they would consider reopening of all the seven domestic destinations, including Jashore and Rajshahi, after June 15.



Social distancing marks are seen on the floor of ticket counters at the capital's Kamalapur Railway Station yesterday. The railway authorities will start selling tickets for some intercity trains today afternoon, a day before resuming passenger train services on a limited scale. PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

New jobs dry up amid shutdown

FROM PAGE 1
postings, as well as portals such as chakri.com, job.com.bd and alljobsbd.com.

In the job portals, registered jobseekers apply to online jobs posted by registered firms.

Following a 7.9 percent annual economic growth by Bangladesh in 2018 – the highest growth in Asia and the Pacific – more than 60,000 jobs were posted on bdjobs.com in 2019. There were 200,000 visitors and more than 1 million page views per day.

All industries have, however, reduced the number of new job postings significantly.

The decline has been rapid in the textile industry. The number of job postings in April was down by 95 percent year-on-year in April in textile and education industries and by 92 percent in the manufacturing industry.

The sharp decline in the textile industry may be related to the pandemic affecting key export markets such as Europe and the United States, said the brief report.

Quoting data from the Department of Inspections for Factories and Establishments, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has recently said initially 1,904 export-oriented garment factories closed and an estimated 21 lakh jobs were lost from March 19 to March 31.

In the first week of this month, the ADB said, the coronavirus pandemic would cut 37 lakh jobs in Bangladesh. The brief report said the manufacturing industry is also affected by disruptions in intermediate imports. While significantly hit, the health sector's job postings saw an 82 percent and the ICT's an 81 percent decline.

The non-government organisation job postings declined by 64 percent, but this was much better than in other industries, possibly due to the need for development assistance in the current emergency, it said.

These results clearly show that businesses stopped hiring workers because of the Covid-19 outbreak.

Job applications declined in tandem with the decreased job postings. Compared to December 2019, the number of job applications stayed around the same level until the second week of March this year, but plunged to 72 percent in the third week, 34 percent in the fourth week and to only 16 percent in the fourth week of April.

Compared to the same month in 2019, job applications were 63 percent in March and 19 percent in April this year, said the brief report.

The government is, however, hopeful its Tk 101,117 crore stimulus packages, which is 3.6 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), will help rejuvenate the labour market once the economy returns to normalcy, said an official of the finance ministry.

Some of the stimulus packages are aimed at providing immediate support to the poor and vulnerable while most of the measures would lend low-cost funds to micro, small, medium and large industries, entrepreneurs, farmers and exporters so that they can resume operations without getting constrained by fund shortages, he said.

The ADB report said continuous monitoring of online job market indicators is necessary in the coming months to understand the impacts of the lockdowns and possible resumption of economic activities.

It also said online job portal data can fill the gap in the current labour market monitoring system by providing time series job posting information in real time. The portal data can reflect rapid labour demand changes, although the data are not representative of the entire labour market, and reflect very little of rural jobs and self-employment.

It is crucial to provide support for businesses and workers to minimise the economic consequences of the pandemic. In addition to public health

and disease containment measures, necessary support may include credit provision, salary subsidies, tax cuts, unemployment benefits, and other social transfers, the brief said.

Talking on the issue, Rizwanul Islam, a former special adviser for the employment sector at the ILO office in Geneva, said given the methodology adopted, the coverage of the exercise had to be limited to the formal sector alone.

But this segment accounts for a small proportion of total employment in Bangladesh. The informal economy has been equally – if not more seriously – hit by the current shutdown, he said.

According to a guesstimate of job loss during April, about one crore people must have lost their jobs. If one adds to the 30 lakh who were already unemployed before the crisis, one can conclude that nearly one in five among the members of the labour force in Bangladesh were without jobs in April, he said.

"While it would be difficult to establish the precise number of people who have lost their jobs during the current economic crisis, it would be important for policy makers to adopt policies to help those affected get re-integrated into the labour market," he said.

"It is very much expected that the job postings would go down," said Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh, a think-tank. "It is surprising that there have been still 13 percent postings."

Some sectors such as e-commerce might still be hiring but most of the sectors of the economy are either cutting jobs or are making up their mind whether to go for lay-offs, by what portion and since when, he said.

"The disease is paralysing people mentally. So, if we can't control the disease, people will not invest and hire and there will be no question for business expansion," he told The Daily Star.

A big leap in new cases

FROM PAGE 1
the number of patients is now 42,844, said DGHS.

Meanwhile, health experts fear the reopening of offices and businesses without proper health and safety measures may deteriorate the situation further.

"The country will fall into extreme risk. The number of patients will rise many times, but hospitals will not be able to handle the pressure," said Prof Muzaherul Huq, former adviser (Southeast Asia region) of the World Health Organisation.

Prof Be-Nazir Ahmed, former director of disease control at the health and family welfare ministry, said instead of being strict, the government was relaxing the closure at a time when the number of patients was climbing.

"We're not against the lockdown lifting. But some preparations are needed beforehand. I found it absent," said the public health expert.

For instance, an infected assistant to a bus driver will act as a super-spreader of coronavirus as he usually deals with passengers.

"So, special measures are needed for bus drivers and their assistants, but we

have not yet heard of any such steps taken for them," said Prof Be-Nazir.

Both experts once again suggested that the government lift the closure in phases to reduce risks.

BRIEFING

During yesterday's briefing on the Covid-19 situation, Prof Dr Nasima Sultana, additional director general (administration) of DGHS, said they collected 12,982 samples and tested 11,301 in 24 hours since Thursday morning.

"So far, we've conducted 2,87,067 tests. In the last 24 hours, 2,523 people tested positive, bringing the total number to 42,844," she said.

Of the 23 deceased, 19 were male and four female, Prof Nasima said, adding that 10 were from Dhaka, nine from Chattogram, two from Rangpur, and one each from Barishal and Sylhet.

The victims were aged between 11 and 90, she added.

Meanwhile, 590 more Covid-19 patients recovered, taking the number to 9,015, she said.

Some 328 people were kept in isolation in the past 24 hours, Prof Nasima added.

From Singapore with love

FROM PAGE 1
for Singapore in 2008 even before he sat for his SSC exams.

He returned after seven years to a wife, a son and a reasonable fortune, which however withered away in the next four years as one venture after another failed.

So, in 2019 Rana went again. But within months, he fell sick with stomach pain and chronic vomiting.

After medical tests, his doctors shook their heads and said there was nothing they could do. The cancer had spread all through his stomach.

Distraught and devastated, all Rana wanted was to go home to Karaitala, Narayanganj and spend his last days with his loved ones.

"The image of my mother and son flashed through my mind. There was nothing I wanted more than to be with them in my dying days."

In stepped Cynthia Goh, a senior consultant of the Singapore National Cancer Centre.

She came to know about the situation on May 15. The problem was that there were no flights between Singapore and Bangladesh because of the global Covid-19 pandemic.

She says she learned that regular flights might not resume before June 10. "But that would be too late for Rana," Cynthia told this correspondent in a WhatsApp conversation.

Her team then started making all kinds of efforts to get Rana home.

They contacted the Bangladesh embassy, but did not get good response from the high commission.

Goh then held a WhatsApp meeting with her colleagues and friends in Singapore and they contacted the Migrant Workers' Centre, which works for the rights of migrant workers in Singapore.

"Then we held another meeting with a medical evacuation company to send Rana to Bangladesh. They said it would be costly and someone would have to take up the responsibility of the payment, but they could send Rana home," she said.

The company had agreed to take the payment of 45,000 Singapore dollars



Cynthia Goh

(almost 32,000 USD) at a later date.

It was obvious that Rana could never manage that amount on his own and the doctors in Singapore would have to do something.

They had already thought of raising funds through crowdsourcing.

Apart from the funding problems arose when the Bangladesh High Commission

wanted Rana's as proof that he is Bangladeshi.

"We collected all the information and sent it. The High Commission also wanted Covid-19 clearance for Rana. So, we also tested him and submitted the documents."

Then the Bangladesh High Commission said they needed a document stating that Rana would be received by a hospital in Bangladesh, Goh explained.

Fortunately, she had worked in Bangladesh for some time and had contacts.

Goh got in touch with doctors at the BSMMU who agreed to receive Rana and provided the required documents.

Then there were formalities to take care of. Landing a special flight required permission from the civil aviation authority and clearance at the airport.

Goh and her team were able to complete all the formalities and managed to send Rana home within a week of learning about his problem.

"We were able to send him home on the night of May 22," Goh said.

But they had not raised the money as yet.

"We started fund raising on May 22 and by May 25, we managed to raise 60,000 Singaporean dollars (a little more than 42,000 USD).

"We have paid 45,000 Singaporean dollars for the airfare and the rest will be sent to his family."

Rana was discharged from the BSMMU on May 23 and has been living with his family in Narayanganj since.

"I have no words to express gratitude," said an emotional Rana. He is convinced Cynthia Goh and her team were not humans.

"They are angels."

Dhaka for quick probe, punishment of killers

FROM PAGE 1
According to Bangladesh foreign ministry sources, 23 of the deceased have been identified so far. They are Zakir Hossain, Syadul, Jewel, Feruj, Jewel, Manik, Asadul, Ainal Mollah and Monir from Madaripur, Rajon, Shakil, Shakib, Shohag and Rahim from Kishoreganj, Sujun and Kamrul from Gopalganj, Rakibul from Jashore, Arfan from Dhaka, Lal Chand from Magura, and Shamim, Akash, Sajib, and Shahin.

The injured are Firoz Bepari, Shamrat Khalashi and Mohammad Ali from Madaripur, Sajid from Faridpur, Janu Mia, Sajal Mia, and Shohag Ahmed from Kishoreganj, Omar Sheikh from Gopalganj, Tariqul Islam from Tangail, and Bakul Hossain and Bappi from Chuadanga.

The bodies were kept at a mortuary in the Libyan city of Mizdah and the injured were admitted to Tripoli Medical College Hospital, said ASM Ashrafur Islam, labour counsellor at the Bangladesh mission in Tripoli.

Reuters, quoting Libya's internationally recognised Government of National Accord, reported on Thursday that the family of a Libyan human trafficker killed 30 migrants, including 26 Bangladeshis, in revenge for his death.

Libya has long been a destination for migrants because of its oil-funded economy, but is also an important way-station for people attempting to reach Europe across the Mediterranean, said the report.

Labour Counsellor Ashrafur said the incident took place between 4:00am and 5:00am on Thursday (Libyan time)

near Mizdah, some 200 kilometers away from the capital.

He said those wounded and tortured were newcomers to Libya. The victims were taken to the spot after being blindfolded, he added.

Ashrafur said the injured Bangladeshis were abandoned on a road. Seeing them, some locals sought help from law enforcers to rescue and send them to hospital.

In the statement yesterday, the Bangladesh foreign minister said the government also contacted the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) for providing assistance in whatever way it could be done.

The foreign ministry said the Bangladesh mission in Tripoli confirmed that 38 Bangladeshis and some Africans were held hostage by the Libyan criminals, who could be human traffickers.

They were being brought to Tripoli on Thursday. On the way, the traffickers demanded high amount of money, although the victims had earlier paid up to \$10,000 each. There were hot negotiation between the traffickers and the victims.

At one stage, the main trafficker was killed by an African. In return, other members of the trafficking gang fired shots abruptly at the Bangladeshis and Africans.

However, one Bangladeshi managed to flee and take shelter at the house of a Libyan family. He contacted the Bangladesh mission and informed it about the incident.

ENSURE PUNISHMENT

National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) yesterday expressed deep concern over the killing of the Bangladeshi migrants in Libya.

The commission in a statement called upon Bangladesh foreign ministry to take required measures to communicate with the Libyan government for ensuring exemplary punishment of the perpetrators and compensations for the victims' families.

The NHRC also urged the authorities to ensure treatment of the injured.

In separate statements, Brac and Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) also expressed deep concern and shock over the deaths of the Bangladeshi migrants and demanded the perpetrators be brought to book.

If required, the Bangladesh government has to take assistance from different international organisations to this end, Brac said in its statement.

Shariful Hasan, head of Brac Migration Programme, said taking advantage of Libya's civil war, human traffickers have been active there for a decade.

The traffickers in the name of sending people to Europe take money equivalent to Tk 3 to 4 lakh from each person. Later, they hold the migrants hostage in different bordering areas and send them in small boats on perilous sea journeys to reach Europe, Shariful said.

The ASK in its statement called upon the government to launch diplomatic efforts to ensure exemplary punishment of those involved in the killing.

Money whitening scope to widen

FROM PAGE 1
He asked, "Why would anyone declare their undeclared income or assets if they can always delay it without paying any penalty?"

A second reason, the economist said, is that the facility is offered for investment in a few handpicked sectors. If the black money-holders do not have any comparative advantage in those sectors, why will they risk their money?

He said, "The opportunity should be available for a limited period of time, say for three months. Within that period, the tax charged can be concessional. Beyond that, the penalties must be severe with credible threats of catching the black money-holders."

"The investors should be allowed to invest in all productive sectors as defined under the Industrial Policy."

The government badly needs revenue in the next fiscal year starting from July 1 with a view to boosting the economy amid drastic fall in economic activities and revenue generation owing to the

nationalwide shutdown put in place to stop the spread of the virus.

But the economy will take time to recover and revenue recovery will take even longer.

The pandemic has seriously impacted the country's economy. The extended closure of business establishments and offices as well as other social distancing measures resulted in simultaneous supply and demand shocks, with production, consumption, trade and investment all at a standstill.

The traditional growth engines of the country's economy like export-oriented industries, remittances and small and medium enterprises have all grounded to a halt. The pandemic cut 3.7 million jobs, according to the Asian Development Bank.

Revenue collection fell more than 55 percent in April, revealing the massive hit the economy has taken from the pandemic. The pestilence may inflict a minimum revenue loss of 2 per cent of GDP.

With rising expenditure and declining revenues, additional government financing requirements in fiscal 2019-20 are estimated at \$8.8 billion, or 14.2 percent of this fiscal year's budget.

About \$2.9 billion of the deficits will be financed through external sources and \$5.9 billion from the domestic market. There is no accurate data on how much black money Bangladesh has.

The Bangladesh Economic Association in May 2018 estimated that around Tk 5-7 lakh crore black money is used in the economy.

A finance ministry report prepared on the underground economy in 2012 implied that the amount of black money was around 45 percent to 85 percent of Bangladesh's gross domestic product (GDP).

The size of the shadow economy in Bangladesh was 27.60 percent of Bangladesh's GDP in 2015, down from 36.65 percent in 2003, according to a working paper of the International Monetary Fund in January 2018.

Bus owners push

FROM PAGE 1
The passenger welfare organisation in a statement said thousands have become unemployed and hiked costs would 'rub salt on the wound'.

BUS OWNERS FOR DOUBLING FARE

Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader joined the meeting using video conference and said transport services must follow the health guidelines and maintain social distance among the people onboard.

No standing passengers would be allowed, 25 to 30 percent seats must be empty, everyone must wear a mask, and the vehicles have to be disinfected before starting and after ending a journey, the minister said.

He also added that there should be hand washing facilities at all bus terminals and people should not be picked up in the middle of the journey.

"There is a committee of the BRTA to fix fare. It [the committee] would fix a rational fare after discussions with you [owners]," said Quader, also the general secretary of the ruling Awami League.

Khondaker Enayet Ullah, secretary general of Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association, said maintaining social distance between passengers would reduce a bus's capacity to 50 percent of normal levels.

"In that case, bus fares have to be doubled," a participant of the meeting quoted Enayet as saying.

After the meeting, Enayet Ullah told The Daily Star that they will resume operation of buses from Monday across the country.

City services, inter-district services and even the ones within the districts would resume.

However, the number of buses on the roads will increase gradually, he said and each bus will carry about half of its capacity, he said.

"We requested permission to increase fare. Decisions would be taken in this regard tomorrow."

Secretary Nazrul Islam told reporters that there would be a team at each bus terminal to check whether all precautionary measures have been taken.

About the transport leaders' demand for tax cut on the vehicles, Nazrul Islam said they would decide after talking with finance ministry officials.

LAUNCH AND TRAIN OPERATION TO RESUME SUNDAY

The decision came at a meeting of launch owners and Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority Chairman Commodore Golam Sadeq. The meeting was attended, among others, by police and coast guard officials.

The meeting decided to install disinfectant tunnels at all launch terminals and launch authorities would check the temperature of passengers.

Following the demand of launch owners to increase fare, the meeting decided to observe the situation for 10 days. Currently, launch owners would operate launches following the previous fares.

Md Shamsuzzaman, director general of Bangladesh Railway, yesterday said they would start selling train tickets from afternoon today.

He said they would resume operation of only intercity trains on Sunday, that too on a limited scale. "The number of trains would be small and we would sell 50 percent of the tickets for each train to ensure social distancing."

No AC coach would be operational as per the DGHS guidelines, he added.

Sohail Rahman

FROM PAGE 1
a spokesperson of the company. They went to the UK to be with their pregnant daughter, the official added.

A chartered plane carrying them left Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport for the UK, they said.

Earlier on Thursday, former BNP leader and foreign minister M Morshed Khan and his wife Nasrin Khan left the country.

He has been suffering from different complications, including Parkinson's disease, for a long time and he went to the UK for treatment, family sources said.

"A chartered flight carrying two passengers left Dhaka for London at 1:25pm on Thursday," Group Captain AHM Touhid-ul Ahsan, a director of the airport, told The Daily Star.

When asked about the passengers' identity, he suggested contacting immigration officials.

He could not provide any more details.

Family sources said Morshed's son Faisal Morshed Khan lives in London.

Morshed was made foreign minister after the BNP-led four party government came to power in 2001.

He resigned from the BNP in November last year citing personal issues.

The government suspended passenger flight operations until May 30 to contain the spread of coronavirus. Cargo flight operations and special flight operations are not restricted.