

Experts warn

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than half of them -- 25,664 -- were detected in the last two weeks, he pointed out.

The remaining cases were detected between March 8 and May 18.

As many as 2,381 people tested coronavirus positive and 22 died in 24 hours till 2:30pm yesterday.

Weeks before Eid, which was celebrated on May 23, the government announced that shopping malls would reopen on a limited scale, following a closure of more than a month and a half.

Although most of the malls remained closed, many opened their shutters, attracting shoppers.

Then thousands left the capital days before Eid to celebrate the festival at their village homes, violating travel restrictions which had been imposed to contain the spread of coronavirus.

Prof Muzaherul said such increased public movement has caused the number of coronavirus cases to go up significantly. "The country is now under serious risk of coronavirus transmission."

Again, after the government on May 28 declared that the coronavirus-driven shutdown would be withdrawn, people in droves returned to Dhaka to join work, ignoring social distancing guidelines and posing risks of contracting the disease and spreading it to others. On the same day, the government's very own National Technical Advisory Committee warned of an explosion in Covid-19 cases if health and safety measures are not implemented strictly.

"Lifting the lockdown before strictly implementing the rules for preventing transmission will increase the number of positive patients and create pressure on the healthcare system," read the statement of the 17-member committee.

Students have to wait more

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said Ziaul, also the chairman of Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education, Dhaka.

He said many of about 16 lakh students and their guardians, who don't have access to internet at home, would have to go out to complete the admission process online. "They can be exposed to risk of contracting novel coronavirus. The current situation is not in favour of starting the admission process," Ziaul said.

Board officials said many students and guardians will have to visit local computer shops to complete the admission process online as they don't have access to internet at home. This will increase their chance of being infected with the deadly virus. The risks will be lower once the infection curve bends downward in the country. All educational institutions in the country have remained closed since March 17 due to the Covid-19 outbreak. The government has now extended the closure until June 15 to stem the spread of the virus.

On April 27, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said educational institutions might remain closed until September if the situation did not improve.

According to the results of SSC and equivalent exams published on

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Prof Dr Md Shahidullah, chairperson of the committee, also acknowledged that the recent surge in coronavirus cases was a result of people's increased movement before and after the Eid.

"Apart from this, lack of awareness among people is another reason. We've seen people roaming in the streets without maintaining health safety. This has a cumulative impact on the rise in novel coronavirus cases," said Shahidullah, also a senior child specialist and the president of Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council.

He, however, said that if people followed health guidelines in the coming days, the transmission risk would subside.

BRIEFING

The 22 deaths took the death toll to 672, according to Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

The Covid-19 death rate in the country is now 1.36 percent, Prof Dr Nasima Sultana, additional director general (administration) of DGHS, said at a briefing yesterday.

A total of 11,439 samples were tested at 52 labs across the country in the 24 hours till 2:30pm yesterday. Meanwhile, 816 Covid-19 patients recovered during the period, taking the total number of recovered patients to 10,597. The recovery rate reached 21.39 percent, she said, adding that 449 people were placed under isolation in those 24 hours.

Among the deceased, 19 were male and three female, she said, adding that 11 were from Dhaka, eight from Chattogram, two from Sylhet and the others from Barishal Division.

Of them, one was between 21-30, eight between 41-50, four within 51-60, seven between 61-70 and the other two between 71-80 years, Dr Nasima also said.

Sunday, a total of 16,90,529 students came out successful.

Several education board officials also expressed fear that the admission seekers might have to wait for months for the beginning of the academic year of Class 11 due to the novel coronavirus situation.

"This year's HSC batch will certainly lose time from the academic year [July-June]," said a board official, adding that it would take at least a month to complete the three-phased admission process.

A new academic year for HSC and equivalent courses usually begins on July 1 each year.

Ziaul, however, said there was nothing to be worried about the start of classes and academic year.

"Students will get two years. We will take steps to minimise their academic loss if the academic year starts behind schedule," he said.

This year, the government is set to introduce a fully online application system for enrollment of students in higher secondary colleges and madrasas.

Until last year, students used to apply for admission to colleges through online and SMS. The SMS-based system will not be available from this year.

First post-shutdown flight

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The return flight however carried 20 passengers, Tahera added.

Officials of HSIAT said they have taken all preparations at the airport and are also carrying out monitoring activities so that passengers and others concerned follow the health guidelines.

For the two other private airlines -- US-Bangla Airlines and Novoair -- the number of outgoing and incoming passengers were slightly higher than Biman's.

The first post-shutdown flight of private air operator US-Bangla Airlines left Dhaka Airport for Chattogram at 7:00am with 28 passengers on board, Kamrul Islam, general manager (public relations) of US-Bangla Airlines, told The Daily Star.

Another US-Bangla flight left Dhaka for Saidpur at 8:30am with 51 passengers on board. The return flight had 54 passengers, said Kamrul Islam.

Novoair operated four flights as of 12:42pm -- from Dhaka to Saidpur with 40 passengers, two Chattogram flights with 38 and 30 passengers and one to Sylhet with 31 passengers, sources at the airport said.

The three airlines are scheduled to operate 24 daily round trips on three domestic routes to and from the capital.

Of the 24 daily flights, 11 will be on the Dhaka-Chattogram-Dhaka, nine on Dhaka-Saidpur-Dhaka, and four on Dhaka-Sylhet-Dhaka routes.

Biman and Novoair each will operate seven flights daily, while US-Bangla Airlines will conduct 10 daily flights on the three routes, sources in the airlines said.

"We will operate morning and evening flights to Chattogram and Sylhet and three flights to Saidpur daily from today using our Dash 8Q-400 aircraft," Tahera said.

US-Bangla Airlines will operate six daily flights to Chattogram, three to Saidpur and one to Sylhet.

Novoair said they would operate three flights each to Chattogram and Saidpur, and one flight to Sylhet daily.

The airline officials said they have already taken all preparations to resume domestic flight operations following the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh's (CAAB's) prescribed health guidelines, including disinfecting the aircraft every time before boarding passengers.

On Thursday, the government decided to resume domestic flight operations on a limited scale -- initially on Dhaka-Chattogram, Dhaka-Sylhet and Dhaka-Saidpur routes -- while the ongoing international flight suspension will be in effect till June 15.

CAAB Chairman Air Vice Marshal M Mafidur Rahman said all airlines must follow the health guidelines to operate domestic flights.

According to CAAB's guidelines, all airlines have to keep at least 30 percent seats vacant on each flight to ensure social distancing, keeping a minimum gap of a seat between two passengers if they are not from the same family.

It further instructed that the front or the last row of seats on each flight must remain vacant to carry any passenger suspected of being infected with coronavirus.

Crew members will avoid close contact with passengers and provide only necessary in-flight services to passengers -- no food or drinks will be served in flights with an airtime of less than one and a half hours.

US-BANGLA SPECIAL OFFER

US-Bangla Airlines yesterday offered a special one-way fare of Tk 1,999 on the Dhaka-Chattogram route.

The leading private airlines of the country with 13 aircraft in its fleet said they are offering the lowest price as people are experiencing an economic crisis amid the Covid-19, Kamrul Islam, general manager, public relations, US-Bangla Airlines, told The Daily Star.

The reduced airfare will come into effect from today, the airlines said in a press release.

US-Bangla had earlier set a Tk 3,000 fare for one-way trips to Chattogram, which was Tk 2,500 before the Covid-19 outbreak.



PHOTO: AMIRAN HOSSAIN

A bus conductor sprays disinfectant on the hands of a passenger inside the vehicle in the capital's Mohakhali area yesterday. In line with government instruction on following physical distancing, the bus carried passengers at half capacity. Road transport services resumed yesterday after remaining suspended for more than two months.

Containment zones planned

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The "green zone" will be out of restrictions while the areas that have seen a low number of Covid-19 cases will be put in the "yellow zone" where movement of people, businesses and transport services will be allowed on "a limited scale".

But it will be up to the experts to set the criteria for the three zones.

If the number of infections goes up in any area or ward or upazila or district, it will be put in the "red zone", said the sources.

Briefing reporters after the meeting, Zahid said, "The areas will be classified as red, green and yellow zones on the basis of death and infection rates."

"We sat today following the prime minister's instructions. Now we will make a specific plan and try to implement it together," he mentioned.

The development comes a day after the government eased the nationwide 66-day shutdown, ignoring warnings from experts. Transport services had remained suspended and most of the businesses and offices were closed during the period.

Offices, businesses and transport services resumed on Sunday on "a limited scale" despite a spike in the number of deaths and positive cases.

Twenty-two people died from Covid-19 in 24 hours till yesterday afternoon, taking the death toll to 672. And 2,381 people tested positive for the virus during the period, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

With this, the total number of infections stood at 49,532.

On May 28, the government's National Technical Advisory Committee suggested the withdrawal of closure in phases, warning that the situation might worsen if safety measures are not strictly implemented. But their recommendations went unheeded.

THE MEETING

The meeting decided to draw up a virus containment plan within two days in consultation with experts and epidemiologists and inform the mayors and district administrations on how to implement it.

"We will devise a plan. We discussed it here [at the meeting]. After preparing it, we all, including the home and LGRD ministries and mayors, will try to implement it," said the health minister.

Asked whether the capital, Narayanganj, Gazipur and Chattogram will be put in the "red zone", Zahid said these districts have high infection rates till date.

"Experts will decide on it. But I think these districts should be in the red zone since the number of infections is high."

He further said most of the districts and upazilas are still in good shape and they want to keep those in that state.

Replying to another query, he said zone-wise categorisation will be done by analysing data on Covid-19 infections.

"For example, if an area inside the capital sees a high number of infections, the area will be locked down for a certain time. Experts will advise on the lockdown period."

According to a meeting source, security measures in the "red zone" will be strengthened so that no one can enter or go out of the area.

"We are already in a high-risk situation. So we all have to follow the health safety guidelines properly," the source quoted the health minister as saying.

At the meeting, the mayors expressed resentment at the fact that their suggestions were not sought before easing the shutdown.

When they wanted to know the specifics of the lockdown, they were told that people's movement in the affected areas will be restricted and shops will be closed. Only the shops selling essentials will be allowed to open, said the source.

Buses get back on the roads

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"We are charging passengers Tk 48 for the distance between Pallabi and Sadarghat instead of the previous fare of Tk 30," he said.

Half the seats have been kept empty to maintain physical distance among passengers, he added.

Mosharref Hossain, general manager of Hanif Paribahan, said, "The presence of passengers is very thin."

Seven mobile courts of Bangladesh Road Transport Authority fined nine traffic violators Tk 16,000 in different parts of the country.

HEALTH RULES IGNORED IN LAUNCH

Six intercity trains plied yesterday with about half the seats empty. Two other trains didn't operate because it was their weekly day off, said Aminul Hoque, Kamalapur station manager.

Five of the trains left Dhaka for different destinations and another operated between sylhet and Chattogram.

Eleven more express trains would be operational from tomorrow. They are: Teesta, Benapole, Nilsagar, Rupsha, Kapotakkho, Modhumoti, Meghna, Kishoreganj, Upakul, Brahmaputra, and Kurigram.

At Sadarghat Launch terminal, swarming crowds defied all rules yesterday as they gathered around noon. The absence of any Dhaka-Damudya launch made the situation worse, said an official of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority.

"We had preparations to make people follow the health guidelines, but the huge number of passengers made it difficult," he said, wishing not to be named.

Teargas fired outside White House

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at speed after having apparently breached a barricade.

The driver was taken to hospital after the protestors hauled him from the vehicle, although there were no immediate reports of other casualties.

The New York Times said he was later arrested.

Minneapolis police later reported they had discovered caches of homemade firebombs around the two cities.

There were other large-scale protests Sunday night, including in New York and Miami.

Washington's mayor ordered a curfew from 11:00 pm until 6:00 am, as a report in the New York Times said that President Donald Trump had been rushed by Secret Service agents into an underground bunker at the White House on Friday night during an earlier protest.

The White House yesterday called for "law and order" and blamed agitators for a sixth straight night of violent protests, reports Reuters.

"We need law and order in this country," White House spokeswoman Kayleigh McEnany told Fox News. She said Antifa, an anti-fascist group, was "certainly behind" the violence.

In Louisville, Kentucky, CBS affiliate WLKY-TV reported the local police

chief as saying law enforcement shot and killed a man yesterday morning as they broke up a crowd, although it was unclear if the group was taking part in protests.

Meanwhile, China said yesterday unrest in the United States highlighted its severe problems of racism and police violence, and exposed Washington's double standards in supporting Hong Kong's protesters.

"Black people's lives are also lives. Their human rights must also be guaranteed," foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told reporters in Beijing.

"Racism against ethnic minorities in the US is a chronic disease of American society," Zhao added.

Major music industry labels -- Atlantic Records, Capitol Music Group, Warner Records, Sony Music -- are pledging to halt business today, in solidarity with anti-racist demonstrators demanding structural social change and an end to police brutality.

ROLEX STORE RANSACKED

Looting was reported Sunday night in Philadelphia and the Los Angeles suburb of Santa Monica, and images on Fox TV showed ransacked Rolex and Gucci stores in New York city.

Officials in LA -- a city scarred by

They were also informed that if a person in any ward of the three cities undergoes a test for the virus, a copy of the test results will be sent to the ward councillor so that he remains aware of the situation in the area and take steps in line with the guidelines to be prepared by experts, said the source.

Besides, measures will be taken to prevent any outsider from entering an area that has seen a high number of infections.

Talking to reporters after the meeting, Asaduzzaman said, "The rate of infections is increasing every day and so is the number of tests."

"That's why we decided on zone-wise categorisation as per the instructions from the prime minister," he said.

The meeting was also attended by Cabinet Secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam; Principal Secretary at the PMO Ahmad Kaikaus; IEDCR Director Meerjady Sabrina Flora; Dhaka North City Corporation Mayor Mohammad Atiul Islam; Dhaka South City Corporation Mayor Fazle Noor Taposh; Narayanganj City Corporation Mayor Selina Hayat Ivy; Gazipur City Corporation Mayor Jahangir Ahmed and Inspector General of Police Benazir Ahmed.

GOVT OFFICES

As part of safety precautions against Covid-19, the government will not allow the presence of more than 25 percent of the officials and employees in offices at ministries and departments, said State Minister for Public Administration Farhad Hossain.

"We don't want to put employees at risk of infection. We will do only the necessary work with a minimum number of employees," he told reporters at the secretariat.

The private offices will make decisions on their own, keeping the safety guidelines in mind, he added.

ACTION IF RULES IGNORED: QUADER

Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader said the government will take tough steps if health guidelines are not followed and social distancing is not maintained in public transport, reports BSS.

"If people do not follow health guidelines and maintain social distancing...the government may make harsh decisions again."

Quader, also the Awami League general secretary, was talking to officials of the bridges division through a videoconference yesterday.

He urged transport owners and workers to abide by the government rules and "set a humanitarian example".

He urged the law enforcement agencies, vigilance teams, mobile courts and bus terminal authorities to strictly monitor the sector.

Watch it closely

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of a government-formed expert committee to supervise, monitor and support the coronavirus response, said the government has to look at measures to break the transmission circle while reopening.

He said 100 percent use of face mask has to be ensured and if required different punitive measures alongside monetary fines should be imposed for violations.

He added the eight-member expert committee already recommended the government to distribute face masks among at least one crore people free of cost.

Similarly, free hand sanitisers could have been distributed, he added.

He also said better coordination between the government's health department and other bodies was essential in this crisis.

Khairul Islam, regional director (South Asia), WaterAid, said the government should observe the current resumption of offices until June 15.

After that, the government should not hesitate either to add new measures or curb the current one based on the outcome, he said.

Dr Firdausi Qadri, emeritus scientist at International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh, said there is a necessity of further research on the virus.

It is also important to know what kind of immunological response has been developed among those who were infected with the virus, she said.

Rawshan Ara Begum, a member of the national technical advisory committee to tackle the Covid-19 outbreak, said as several government circulars have been issued already, the committee recommended placing greater emphasis on their implementations.

She said maternal mortality has turned out to be a big concern because of the pandemic as it forced an additional 35 percent women to give birth at home.

Already, 50 percent of the country's babies are born at home, she said, adding that home delivery has been the main reason behind maternal mortality.

She said diseases like eclampsia could develop due to home delivery and cause a rise in maternal deaths. Besides, fistula could also rise and mothers can face various other complications.

Addressing the virtual programme, Manusher Jonno Foundation Executive Director Shaheen Anam said reproductive health rights of women, especially the adolescents, has been ignored amid the pandemic.

She stressed that a strong recommendation to this end be placed before the government.

She also urged for safe disposal of used face masks and gloves.

Summing up the dialogue, noted economist and convener of the citizen's platform for SDGs, Bangladesh, Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya said there is still a concern about the relaxation of the shutdown.

He urged for rigorous coronavirus testing and applying zoning method to contain the virus.

Besides, he also stressed on more research and urged the government to make the public informed about the pandemic.

Asif Ibrahim, chairman of Chattogram Stock Exchange, and lawmaker and rights activist Aroma Dutta, among others, spoke during the virtual dialogue.

UAE says Israel should back off threat to annex West Bank

REUTERS, Dubai

A senior United Arab Emirates official said yesterday that any unilateral move by Israel to annex parts of the occupied West Bank would be a serious setback for the Middle East peace process.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said cabinet discussions would begin on July 1 on his plan to extend Israeli sovereignty to territory Palestinians want for their own state.

mobilization ever -- to help restore order and extended a curfew for a third night Sunday.

The Department of Defense said that around 5,000 National Guard troops had been mobilized in 15 states as well as the capital Washington, with another 2,000 on standby. 'A NATION IN PAIN' Joe Biden, Trump's likely Democratic opponent in November's presidential election, visited the scene of one anti-racism protest.

"We are a nation in pain right now, but we must not allow this pain to destroy us," Biden tweeted, posting a picture of him speaking with an African-American family at the site where protesters had gathered in Delaware late Saturday.

Floyd's death has triggered protests beyond the United States, with thousands in Montreal and London marching in solidarity on Sunday.

On the other side of the globe yesterday, thousands marched to the US consulate in Auckland chanting "no justice, no peace" and "black lives matter."

In Germany, England football international Jadon Sancho marked one of his three goals for Borussia Dortmund against Paderborn by lifting his jersey to reveal a T-shirt bearing the words "Justice for George Floyd."