

# India allows use of experimental drugs amid pandemic

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Indian health ministry has issued a draft notification allowing manufacture, import and "compassionate use" of any unapproved drug for severely-ill Covid-19 patients.

The drugs in the phase-III of clinical trials were allowed with an aim to facilitate the availability of experimental drugs.

The draft New Drugs and Clinical Trials (Amendment) Rules stipulate manufacture and import of unapproved drugs based on a prescription by a hospital or medical institution.

Several drugs across India are in phase-III clinical trials phase for Covid-19 and antiviral remdesivir was approved last week for use on severely infected patients.

India's drug regulator granted US pharma giant Gilead Sciences marketing authorisation for the drug for "restricted emergency use" on hospitalised Covid-19 patients.

According to a gazette notification of the draft rules published on June 5, a hospital or medical institution may import new drug for "compassionate use for treatment of patients suffering from life-threatening disease or disease causing serious permanent disability or disease requiring therapy for unmet medical need" by applying to the Central Drug Regulator.

Also, if any hospital prescribes a new drug for the same purposes then they may be approved to be manufactured in a limited quantity subject to provisions of the rules.

The manufacturer intending to manufacture a new drug will have to obtain the consent in writing from the patient to whom the medicine has been prescribed or his legal heirs and make an application to the Ethics Committee of the hospital or medical institution for obtaining its specific recommendation for manufacture of such new drug, according to the draft rules.

After obtaining the recommendation of the Ethics Committee, the manufacturer will make an application to obtain the permission to the Central Licensing Authority for manufacturing the new drug for the purpose of compassionate use, the draft rules stated.

"The manufacturer to whom the permission is granted shall make use of the new drug only for the purposes specified in the permission and no part of it shall be sold in the market or supplied to any other person, agency, institution or place," the rules stated.

The quantity of any new drug manufactured or imported on the basis of permission granted shall not exceed one hundred average dosage per patient, the draft rules stated.

## AL leader sued

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administration filed a case with the police station on May 29 and an investigation was ongoing.

According to the case statement, the Elan Corporation re-applied for a No Objection Certificate (NOC), attaching ISO 13458 certificate and Certificate of Analysis on May 19, and the DGDA issued the NOC on the same day.

Later, acting on a tip-off, the DGDA re-checked the documents and found some inconsistencies, according to the case statement.

"The mask producing company has issued the Free Sale Certificate by itself. In fact, drug regulatory authority [of the country in question] issues such certificate," read the statement.

According to the rules, it is the duty of the DGDA to scrutinise the documents before issuing an NOC and the DGDA's Ruhul Amin claimed they had issued the NOC "as per rules".

The DGDA, however, issued the NOC on the same day that the application was submitted by Elan

Corporation, according to the case statement.

When asked whether the company submitted a sample of the mask with the application, Ruhul Amin said, "[They] submitted ...

"But this is a time of the coronavirus emergency. Certain officers of ours have done this. Call me during office hours to know details from them," Ruhul Amin said when contacted around 7:00pm yesterday. "This is now not an issue for DGDA alone. Police is investigating it. Everything will come to light."

Owner of Elan Corporation Aminul Islam said he had an agreement with Tazul Islam that the latter would use his license and be liable for any irregularities.

Asked whether the agreement has any legal ground, he replied, "It has no legal ground but sometimes we need to keep requests."

A police official said the case is in the process of being transferred to the criminal investigation department.

## We're among 10 countries

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Meanwhile, 42 people died from coronavirus over the last 24 hours, said Dr Nasima Sultana, additional director general (administration) of the DGHS.

The death toll now stands at 930.

Among the dead, 33 were male and nine female, she said, adding that 25 were from Dhaka, eight from Chattogram, one from Sylhet, one from Rajshahi, two from Khulna, one from Rangpur, two from Barishal and two from Mymensingh division.

Of them, one was between 11-20 years old, three between 21-30, one between 31-40, seven between 41-50, 10 between 51-60, 12 between 61-70, four were between 71-80, two between 81-90 and two between 91-100 years old, Dr Nasima also said.

During this period, another 657 COVID-19 patients have recovered, taking the total number of recoveries to 14,507, she said.

According to a projection by the team of experts, comprising officials from University of Dhaka, Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), and University of Toronto in Canada, the number may jump to 87,000 by the middle of this month and to 123,000 by the end of it.

Based on the current trend of the Covid-19 spread and epidemiological modelling, Shafiu Shimul, an associate professor of health economics at DU, who led the projection, said with the reopening of everything, the spread of the virus is likely to accelerate further.

Among the 10 countries, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan are the worst affected

## Exports' rally has begun

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May's receipts take the export earnings so far this fiscal year to about \$31 billion, down 18.88 per cent year-on-year. With just one month remaining of fiscal 2019-20, the export target will most definitely be missed by a country mile.

Garment, which typically brings home more than 84 per cent of the export earnings, fetched \$1.23 billion, again three times more than it had managed the previous month.

In May last year, apparel shipments raked in \$3.24 billion.

"Our observation is that the slowdown may persist until the end of the year in varying magnitude, depending on the post-pandemic global situation," said Rubana Huq, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA).

At the time of writing, garment work orders worth \$3.15 billion were cancelled.

"It is a tough time for the industry," she said, adding that a long hangover of the export disruption may have severe implication on the industry's

financial ability to withstand and bounce back, so it deserves more attention of policymakers.

A big number of workers will lose their jobs because of the lack of work orders from international retailers, Mansur said, while calling for the formation of a central fund for the garment sector.

The fund can be used during the crisis for payment to workers so that they do not lose their jobs.

"The stimulus packages the government announced so far are loans and not the direct cash support for exporters," he added.

The BGMEA chief sought policy support like an exchange rate premium of Tk 5 per US dollar (while document purchasing) on the local value retention, special treatment for exports to high-tariff markets, support research and development, trial production for new products while opting for sector diversification.

Urgent policy reforms are needed for workers' housing and subsidising food expense. "So an unemployment fund can be launched," she added.



People line up in front of the office of Biman Bangladesh Airlines in the capital's Motijheel yesterday to buy tickets to Italy. Many of them work in the European country and they came to Bangladesh before it was hit by the coronavirus outbreak. The Bangladesh embassy in Italy and Biman have arranged a special flight to Rome on Friday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

## Demand sky high, prices too

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"Earlier, our supplier used to import cylinder through the sea port. As it is closed now, he is importing it by air from China. Due to the increased transportation cost, the price has gone up," he said.

Siddiqur Rahman, a retail seller at Makkah Surgical Market, said they used to sell or rent out maximum 10 cylinders a month. "But now there is a demand for at least a hundred oxygen cylinders every day."

The suppliers said they were unable to supply oxygen cylinders in bulk right now, he added.

According to the official website, supplier company Linde Bangladesh is selling an oxygen cylinder set at Tk 26,522. A 1,400-litre cylinder costs Tk 16,100, oxitherapy set Tk 8,970, face mask Tk 161, nasal cannula Tk 104, and trolley Tk 1,087, while oxygen refill charge is Tk 100.

A 1,400-litre cylinder can be used for 10-11 hours continuously at 2 litres per minute.

During this coronavirus outbreak, Linde has limited its sales with some restrictions, said a source from the company.

It decided that to get a cylinder set, one must bring a photocopy of National ID and recommendation of a doctor stating that the patient needs 24-hour oxygen support.

One customer will be able to buy only one cylinder. To get two cylinders or more, one must contact their territory officer of business head, according to an internal circular of Linde, formerly called Bangladesh Oxygen Company.

An official of Linde, wishing not to be named, said there is no dearth of oxygen gas but they are facing crisis of cylinders because of the high demand. And they also did not hike the cylinder prices.

In retail market, a Chinese cylinder now sells at Tk 26,500 while Linde's cylinder costs Tk 30,000 to Tk 35,000. But Linde's cylinder is mostly stock-out at retail market.

Mr Azam, a depot manager at Spectra Oxygen, another supplier, said there is a crisis now as many people are buying and stocking cylinders out of panic. "But we have recently imported cylinders. Hopefully, we will start meeting the demand."

Sellers in the BMA market said of the customers, most are from private clinics and hospitals. Some people are also coming to keep cylinder at home.

Haji Md Rezaul Islam, president of Medical and Surgical Equipment Market at BMA Bhaban said, "As there is a huge demand for cylinder, some sellers are taking advantage of it."

**DEMAND AT HOSPITALS**  
Gobinda Acherjee, general secretary of Private Hospital Owners Association in Savar, said the demand for oxygen cylinder has risen five times in Savar and Ashulia.

Apart from those admitted in hospital, there are many patients staying in isolation at home. "Every day, we get calls over phone to get them oxygen cylinder service. But we fail to meet this demand."

Masud Parvez, managing director of Regent Group, said they have two private hospitals in Mirpur and Uttara that are dedicated Covid-19 treatment and both have a central oxygen supply.

"Still we need cylinders to meet the huge demand as most Covid-19 patients need the oxygen," he said.

"Earlier, we had 30 cylinders at Mirpur Regent Hospital. Now we kept 73 cylinders. Uttara Regent Hospital had 10 cylinders; now it has 30."

According to Prof Dr Mujibur Rahman, head of Medicine department at Dhaka Medical College and Hospital, said the demand of oxygen gas has increased at hospitals, giving an example of a ward at DMCH.

"Out of 80 Covid-19 patients admitted here, 60 needed oxygen support," he said.

**GOVT POSITION**  
DGHS Deputy Director (Hospital and Clinic) Younus Ali said there is crisis of cylinders. "The government procured a good number of cylinders to support the hospitals after the pandemic began in the country."

Habibur Rahman Khan, additional secretary (admin) at Health Services Division of Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, also chief of the ministry's media cell, said the government is trying to import cylinders but the situation is difficult all over the world.

"Still the ministry is trying ... Let's see, how many days it takes."

He also said they requested the private companies to increase their oxygen production and cylinder import.

**CALLS IN SOCIAL MEDIA**  
Meanwhile in social media, relatives of many Covid-19 patients or who have severe breathing problems, are seeking cylinders.

Volunteers of a Facebook group "Songjog: Connecting People" are requesting people to give them the unused or empty cylinders.

"We will refill the cylinder and deliver it to the people who need it at this time," reads the Facebook post.

In another post, a volunteer of Bidyannondo Foundation yesterday wrote, "Can you lend us if you have an unused cylinder in your house? We will refund it within two months or if you need. We will pay the price if needed."

**RAJSHAHI**

In Rajshahi city, the authorities of hospitals and clinics expressed worries that they would face a crisis of oxygen cylinders when the number of patients cross 200, reports our correspondent Anwar Ali.

The authorities said they have kept arrangements for oxygen supply ready as the situation has begun worsening this week. Nearly a dozen Covid-19 patients have got admitted to different hospitals.

Right now, Rajshahi Medical College Hospital (RMCH) has 300 cylinders while each of 46 large private hospitals and clinics have a stock of at least a dozen.

"None of us invested in buying new cylinders; we just kept our existing cylinders refilled," said Mokhlesur Rahman, general secretary of Rajshahi Private Hospital and Clinic Owners' Association.

A new cylinder costs around Tk 16,000 while refilling costs less than Tk 200. Besides a depot of Bangladesh Oxygen Limited, there are offices of two private oxygen suppliers in the city.

The RMCH has an underground plant for supplying oxygen and they never ran out of the gas, said RMCH Deputy Director Dr Saiful Ferdous M Khairul Ataturk.

"Yet we have raised our stock of cylinders as those might be necessary for the three corona units set up outside the hospital."

**CHATTOGRAM**  
The dealers in Chattogram blamed it on the rich who are hoarding cylinders for a situation when a coronavirus case will found in their families, reported our correspondent Mostafa Yousuf.

Jamal Uddin, an oxygen dealer at Chattogram Medical College Hospital (CMCH) gate area, told The Daily Star yesterday that the rich people were buying oxygen cylinders in bulk.

Yesterday morning, he sold 50 cylinders but could not supply to those who came in the afternoon. However, oxygen cylinders and oximetre started to come in the market and hopefully the crisis will be eased from tomorrow (today), he added.

In mobile court drives in the day, two dealers in Sadarghat and CMCH areas were fined Tk 2 lakh for selling 6.8-cubic-metre cylinders at Tk 2,000 each. The maximum retail price of these cylinders is Tk 5,000.

**SYLHET**

Aminul Islam, a businessman in Amberkhana area, said, "I have breathing problems and as the crisis over cylinders is intensifying, I decided to buy one. I visited all stores in the city on Sunday."

He found either the price was too high or there was no supply.

"Then I contacted a supplier. I am going to rent an industrial oxygen cylinder and buy a medical metre, the price of which also doubled these days."

Harun Ahmed, proprietor of Central Surgical Store at Chowhatta, said, "The small cylinders, which used to sell at Tk 13,000 before, now costs Tk 26,000."

"Many people, who don't need it right now, are buying the cylinders and the suppliers are struggling to meet the demand."

Meanwhile, the authorities of Sylhet Saheed Shamsuddin Ahmed Hospital, which is dedicated for Covid-19 treatment, fear they could be in trouble soon because of the rising number of coronavirus patients, reports our Sylhet correspondent Dwoha Chowdhury.

"We have 131 large cylinders and 125 small one in stock. Our daily demand is around 80 to 90 large cylinders and it takes couple of days to send and receive cylinders refilled from Manikganj," said Dr Sushanto Kumar Mahapatro, resident medical officer of the hospital.

"We need at least 500 large cylinders (6.8-litre capacity each) so we can avoid a crisis. Or, a refilling plant for liquid oxygen needed to be installed in Sylhet soon."

**THE RISK**

Some suppliers, however, said the use of a oximetre could be helpful during this coronavirus pandemic. It can determine if a patient needs oxygen supply or not.

Attaching this small device to one's finger will tell him his oxygen level in blood. It would be considered normal if a person's oxygen level in blood is between 94 and 98 percent.

But the price of oximetre has also doubled -- the Chinese one used to sell at Tk 1,200; it is Tk 2,200. The Korean oximetre was priced Tk 2,500; it is now Tk 4,000.

Experts say there are some risks in using oxygen cylinders without the supervision of a health worker.

Prof Dr Mujibur Rahman of DMCH said many people are buying oxygen cylinders in panic. But they have to know how to use it. Otherwise, it may be harmful.

"If oxygen is pushed more than necessary, it may harm the patient's lunge, even the patient may die."

Besides, Oxygen has no smell, no colour; if the cylinder leaks, there is no way to understand. "If it leaks, it may cause or intensify fire. Because oxygen in the cylinder is a highly combustible substance," he said.

## Democrats take a knee in US Congress in George Floyd tribute

AFP, Washington

Democrats knelt in silent tribute to George Floyd in the US Congress yesterday before unveiling a package of sweeping police reforms in response to the killing of African Americans by law enforcement.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer were joined by two dozen lawmakers in Congress' Emancipation Hall -- named in honor of the slaves who helped erect the US Capitol in the 18th century.

They knelt for eight minutes and 46 seconds to mark the length of time a white police officer pinned his knee on the neck of the 46-year-old Floyd, whose death in Minneapolis May 25 unleashed mass protests against racial injustice.

Pelosi and the other senior Democratic leaders, accompanied by members of the Black Congressional Caucus, said their bill aimed to create "meaningful, structural change that safeguards every Americans' right to safety and equal justice."

The legislation seeks to "end police brutality, hold police accountable, improve transparency in policing," a statement said.

The "Justice and Policing Act," which introduced in both chambers of Congress, would make it easier to prosecute officers and rethink how they are recruited and trained.

## East Rajabazar trial lockdown from midnight

UNB, Dhaka

Dhaka North City Corporation Mayor Atiqul Islam yesterday said the city's East Rajabazar area would be put under an "experimental" lockdown from midnight tonight.

"The decision was taken as the density of Covid-19 patients increased in this area," he said at an online meeting of Covid-19 prevention committee.

The meeting decided to set up a control room at Naznin School and College in East Rajabazar with assistance from DNCC ward councilor and representatives from Directorate General of Health Services, Dhaka Metropolitan Police, A2i, E-commerce of Bangladesh (E-Cab) and others concerned.

Only one entrance and exit at Green Road beside IBA Hostel will be open while movement of all kinds of vehicles will be suspended in the area.

People living in East Rajabazar will not be permitted to go out and none from outside can enter the area as well.

## Faridpur town

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Md Alimuzzaman, superintendent of Faridpur police, yesterday shared the information with journalists at his office.

On May 16, the attack was made on the house of Faridpur AL President Subal Saha at Goolchamat in the district town.

But the reason behind the attack could not be known immediately.

Two days later, Subal filed a case against unidentified persons.

After investigation, police arrested the nine for their alleged involvement in the incident, the SP said.

Besides, three cases were lodged against Barkat, Rubel, and Rezaul under the firearms, narcotics control, and special powers acts, said Moshed Alam, officer-in-charge of Faridpur Sadar Police Station.

Contacted, Khandakar Nazmul Hasan, president of Faridpur town unit AL, said, "I have heard of the incident. We will make decisions in this regard after discussing the issue with the central party leaders."

Locals said Subal and Barkat were close to local lawmaker Khandaker Mosharaf Hossain, who is considered to be one of the key persons of AL politics in the district.

## No big rise

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According to the World Bank's World Development Indicator 2019, Bangladesh has the lowest per capita public expenditure in the health sector among the South Asian countries. In India, per capita expenditure was \$15, while it was \$14 in Pakistan and \$6 in Bangladesh. The average South Asian per capita public expenditure was \$15.

Talking to The Daily Star, Shamsul Alam, senior secretary at the General Economics Division of the Planning Commission, said, "You cannot say the ADP allocation for the health ministry is low... Around 5 percent of the total ADP has been allocated for the ministry... There are 58 ministries and divisions.

"Implementation is more important than allocation. We do not see 100 percent utilisation of the allocated money. There is no dearth of funds... But they [the health ministry] need to increase the capacity for utilising funds and ensuring accountability to improve service."

At least 22 out of 62 projects under the health ministry could not be implemented within the deadline, according to officials of planning and finance ministries.

They also mentioned that the pace of implementation of the ministry's largest project -- Tk 36,000-crore Fourth Health, Population and Nutrition Sector Development Programme -- has been slow with the ministry failing to spend two-third of the money allocated since June 2017.

The project officials need to utilise the funds by June 2022 if they are to complete the project on time, they added.

According to the planning ministry's Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division, till April this year, around 70 percent of the health ministry's projects under the ADP were yet to be implemented.

Talking to this newspaper, economist Hossain Zillur Rahman, executive chairman at the Power and Participation Research Centre, said, "The health ministry is a consistent poor performer in terms of ADP implementation. There are some issues like a lack of capacity and corruption."

"So it is understandable that the finance ministry is in doubt about increasing the health budget."

In the absence of adequate allocation and proper utilisation of funds, the out of pocket expenditure (OOP) of people is very high in Bangladesh, mentioned Zillur.

A 2015 health ministry survey shows the OOP accounts for 67 percent of the total healthcare expenditure in Bangladesh. This means, if the healthcare cost is Tk 100, the government provides Tk 34 while the patient spends Tk 67.

The OOP in Bangladesh is the highest in South and Southeast Asia.

Professor Syed Abdul Hamid of the Institute of Health Economics at Dhaka University said, "Implementation of ADP is a problem for the health ministry. A lengthy process of preparing proposals for development projects, feasibility tests and tender are some of the key reasons for the delay in project implementation."

"We also cannot rule out the scope for corruption," he added.