

733 ICU beds in govt hospitals

DGHS informs the HC

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) yesterday informed the High Court that government hospitals across the country have a total of 733 intensive care units (ICU) beds.

Of those, 235 ICU beds have been set up at 17 government hospitals since February this year for the treatment of Covid-19 patients, Deputy Attorney General (DAG) Amit Talukder told the court during the hearing of a writ petition.

He also said the DGHS prescribes treatment to coronavirus patients through hotlines and centrally monitors the treatment management.

The information was placed before the HC bench of Justice M Enayetur Rahim as per its June 8 order, following a virtual hearing on a writ petition filed by the Deputy Registrar Sheikh Abdullah Al Mamun of Bangabandhu

Sheikh Mujib Medical University.

On June 8, the HC bench wanted to know the number of ICU beds at all the government and private hospitals across the country, how the beds are distributed among patients and how the government is prescribing and monitoring treatment of Covid-19 patients centrally.

Earlier, Sheikh Abdullah submitted a writ petition requesting the HC to direct the government to acquire the ICU beds of the private hospitals and to form a central bed bureau in order to provide treatment to Covid-19 patients properly.

Advocate Yeadia Zaman appeared for the writ petitioner while Additional Attorney General Murad Reza represented the state.

On June 14, the next hearing on this writ petition and two other separate writ petitions filed over the management of oxygen supply in the hospitals will be held.

Families of Italy virus victims seek ‘truth and justice’

AFP, Bergamo

Fifty relatives of coronavirus victims yesterday filed complaints over the handling of the pandemic in the first such legal group action in Italy, which has reported over 34,000 deaths.

“We don’t want revenge, we want justice,” said Stefano Fusco, 31, who created a group on Facebook to reach out to others in similar situations after his grandfather died of the virus in a care home in March.

The complaints were filed at the prosecutors’ office in Bergamo, the city in northern Italy worst hit by the pandemic, “because it has become the symbol of this tragedy, though they come from across the country,” Fusco said.

Bergamo prosecutors are conducting a wide-ranging investigation into the health crisis. Local families blame tardiness in enforcing a red zone, as well as years of cuts to healthcare across the northern Lombardy region.

Cristina Longhini, a 39-year old pharmacist, lost her father Claudio, 65. Although he was very sick, the emergency services initially refused to admit him to hospital unless he was having trouble breathing, she said.

Once he was eventually rushed to a Covid-19 hospital in Bergamo, there were no beds free in intensive care. Longhini says the family was asked to try to find an intensive bed somewhere else -- which they desperately tried, and failed, to do.

“They forgot to call us to say he had passed away,” Longhini told AFP.

Efforts to go on to protect

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the Leader of the House.

Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal today places the budget for fiscal 2020-21.

Joining the discussion, Opposition Chief Whip and Jatiya Party lawmaker Mashiur Rahman Ranga suggested that the PM should join the JS session through video conference from her residence, considering her safety amid Covid-19 pandemic.

“Who will run the country in your absence?” he questioned.

In response, Hasina said she doesn’t fear death and that she is ready to sacrifice her life for people.

“There is nothing to be afraid of,” said the PM.

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan, AL lawmakers Matia Chowdhury and ASM Feroz, and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal MP Hasanul Haq Inu also took part in the discussion.

A minute’s silence was observed and a munajat was offered seeking salvation and eternal peace of the departed souls.

Later, the JS unanimously adopted the obituary motion, expressing profound grief at the demise of the AL lawmaker and other distinguished personalities.

EIGHTH SESSION

The budget session of the 11th parliament began at 5:00pm with Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury in the chair.

Wearing masks and gloves, all the lawmakers maintained social

distancing.

At the beginning of the eighth session, the Speaker said, “This session will be conducted in compliance with the health guidelines.”

As part of the health safety measures, a limited number of staffers of the Parliament Secretariat will be on duty during the budget session.

Journalists will not be allowed into the JS to cover the budget session. Instead, they have been requested to follow live telecast of Sangsad TV.

Elderly lawmakers and those suffering from various diseases were discouraged from attending the session.

The Parliament Secretariat’s decision not to have more than 90 lawmakers in each sitting as a safety precaution was followed on the first day of the session.

At the beginning of the proceedings, the Speaker nominated a panel of five chairmen who, in chronological order, will preside over sittings of the House in the absence of the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker.

The panel members are AL lawmakers Muhammad Faruk Khan, AB Tajul Islam and Muhibur Rahman Manik, JP MP Kazi Firoz Rashid and AL MP Meher Afroze Chumki.

Law Minister Anisul Haq placed three ordinances: Use of Information Technology by Court, Value Added Tax and Supplementary Duty (Amendment) Ordinance 2020, and Income Tax Amendment (Ordinance) 2020.

final.

“Coronavirus patients die here every day. We lost three patients today. It is never easy to lose patients... Maybe a few days later, my father might be one of them,” she sobbed. There were 63 patients with coronavirus at the hospital yesterday.

“I have been trying to get my father admitted, but there are no cabins available. So he is home.”

Stories of patients failing to get admitted to a facility are being reported across the country almost every day.



An elderly woman’s son and other family members outside an ambulance after reaching Dhaka Medical College Hospital around noon yesterday. The family members said they had been trying to get her admitted to a hospital with available ICU beds from the night before and came to DMCH as a last resort.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Budget of self-preservation

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month-long general shutdown has left enterprises in a bad way, too.

They are now going for mass layoffs and pay cuts, and it is unlikely that they would be firing on all cylinders in the immediate future given the fast-expanding caseload and runaway death toll.

The economic sacrifices would have been understandable had the nation been able to flatten the curve on coronavirus in the past three months or so. But there does not seem to be any sign of the public health crisis bottoming out anytime soon.

All of this was avoidable, but it is now up to Kamal to mop up this monumental mess.

“We had no idea it would get this bad,” he told The Daily Star over the phone last night.

Sincere, spirited, emotionally intelligent and clued-in to the facts on the ground, he seems to have risen to the occasion, pushing through his understandable fear of coronavirus contagion and working round-the-clock since April from his home, all with the singular hope of gathering the vast resources needed to come out of this crisis alive.

He has been combing through project documents -- which are sanitised painstakingly at both ends before they are placed in front of him -- to cut off funds from those that have been dilly-dallying.

If it is not poring over documents, it is virtual meetings that he has been caught up with, sometimes with bureaucrats, sometimes with multilateral and bilateral lenders.

If the meetings must be in person, the visitors are sanitised before they enter his home and he holds court from as far as possible; and sometimes, he speaks while stood in the staircase

of his sprawling mansion.

In short, he has become an indispensable deal-maker for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in trying to keep the crisis from throwing the economy into its deepest downturn yet.

And yet, he will most definitely come short in meeting the demands from the industries and the general public.

Given the stunning slowdown of the economy, domestic revenue mobilisation cannot be counted on much to fund the Tk 568,090 crore-budget.

The World Bank recently lowered the growth forecast for the economy this fiscal year to just 1.6 percent and 1 percent at best for the next fiscal year.

When there is no GDP growth to speak of, where would the money come from? And if you can’t make the resources available to tackle this crisis, where does it end?

It’s a mindboggling conundrum but one Kamal needs to have a crack at solving by way of the budget for fiscal 2020-21.

For starters, and in a complete departure from the past practice, he can choose to not lay a target on the National Board of Revenue’s head.

As is human psychology, when the task at hand seems impossible to achieve, one tends to just shut off and not put in any effort.

So a huge revenue target could turn out to be counterproductive, this time. Rather, let the tax officials do the best they can.

Bangladesh’s tax-GDP ratio is amongst the lowest in the world despite becoming a wealthier country by the day until coronavirus hit, and one of the main reasons for that is tax evasion and leakages.

Perhaps he could crack down

earnestly on this ill practice.

One way could be through automation. Given the fact that the ongoing pandemic has turbocharged digitalisation, perhaps fiscal 2020-21 could be the year that the tax automation drive finally takes off in full.

At the same time, all-out effort must be given to keep the wheels of the economy moving, and for that Kamal needs to give tax cuts too to industries and corporates.

Both direct and indirect tax collection would take a massive hit, meaning Kamal has to turn to banks and foreign loans and grants to fund a big portion of the budget. The lesser the government deploys the latter two, the better.

This also means, austerity must be enforced. A penny saved is a penny earned -- should be his mantra.

Expenditure must be prioritised.

And there is absolutely no doubt that health should get the top billing this time to douse the burning pathogen, followed by social safety programmes to keep the pandemic from undoing decades of progress in poverty alleviation and then the agriculture sector to keep the nation fed.

Everything else can take a backseat for now.

And it seems Kamal, who must feel the weight of the world on his shoulders, is thinking along these lines.

“Saving people from COVID-19, staving off hunger, finding jobs for the jobless and the marginalised will be the focus,” he said on the eve of the budget. The agro-economy will be encouraged and so too would be the domestic industries.

“We are going back to our roots -- we are looking inwards. And I see the dawn breaking in this way.”

Vital oxygen supply

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whole division.

By the same token, patients in Cox’s Bazar and Bandarban would have to travel to Chattogram where there are only 24 ICU beds dedicated to coronavirus patients.

The other 10 ICU beds in the division are in Cumilla.

“We have started setting up our central oxygen system and hopeful to complete within a very short time. After that we will purchase the other necessary equipment,” said

AKM Humayun Kabir, civil surgeon Bagerhat.

The Daily Star has got a similar response from the civil surgeons in Habiganj, Cox’s Bazar and Bandarban. Experts said the rapid growth of the virus has been vividly exposing the real scenario of the existing arrangements, or the lack of it, in the public hospitals.

Contacted, Aminul Hasan, director (hospitals and clinics) of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), said, “We have taken

the central oxygen supply system.

Aminur said they have already talked with the companies and once approved, Spectra Oxygen Limited will install liquid oxygen tanks at 11 hospitals while Linde Bangladesh Ltd will work in 13 hospitals.

The 11 hospitals whose proposals have already been sent are: Faridpur Medical College Hospital, Syed Nazrul Islam Medical College Hospital, Kishoreganj, Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmed Medical College Hospital, Gazipur, MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital, Sylhet, Sheikh Abu Naser Specialized Hospital, Khulna, 250-Bed General Hospital in Chattogram, Tangail, Gopalganj, Manikganj, and Jamalpur and 100-Bed Children Hospital, Rangpur.

MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital currently has a liquid oxygen tank with a capacity of 10 kilo litres, which will be increased to 20 kilo litres.

The 13 other hospital, whose proposal will be sent today, are: 250-Bed General Hospital in Munshiganj, Habiganj, Chapainawabganj, Kustia, Sherpur, Bagerhat, Borguna, Chuadanga, Bhola, Magura, Nilphamari, 250-Bed Bongomata Sheikh Fazilatunnesa Mujib General Hospital in Sirajganj and Government Employee Hospital in Dhaka.

Habibur Rahman Khan, additional secretary (administration) of health ministry, said although he was not clearly aware of the development but if the proposals were made, they

would get quick approvals.

He said due to the crisis, they will allow some work to start after giving verbal approval.

Contacted, Maklesur Rahman Ripon, deputy general manager of Spectra Oxygen Ltd, said although they got a verbal work order instead of a formal one, they had started work considering the ongoing crisis.

He said they have all the equipment available in Bangladesh and once they got approval, which they hope to get within a day or two, they were hopeful about completing the installations at these 11 hospitals within this month.

The Daily Star could not reach Linde Bangladesh.

Death count

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period, which took the total number of recovery cases to 15,899. The recovery rate is 21.24 percent, she said.

A total of 538 people were placed under isolation in that 24 hours.

Among the newly deceased, 33 were male and four female, she said, adding that 25 were from Dhaka, seven from Chattogram, one from Sylhet, one from Rajshahi, two from Barisal and one was from Mymensingh Division.

Of them, one was between 11 and 20 years old, three between 31 and 40, five between 41 and 50, 10 between 51 and 60, 10 between 61 and 70, seven between 71 and 80 and one between 81 and 90 years old, Prof Nasima also said.

Zafrullah’s condition slightly improves

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Gonoshasthaya Kendra Founder and Trustee Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury has slightly recovered from pneumonia.

His requirement for oxygen support has also decreased, said Prof Brig Gen (retd) Mamun Mostafi yesterday.

Dr Zafrullah tested positive for coronavirus on May 24.

“He is feeling better. His physical condition had been unchanged over the last four days. The improvement is visible today,” Mamun told The Daily Star.

The 79-year-old physician and freedom fighter has been undergoing treatment at the Gonoshasthaya Nagar Hospital. He had taken plasma therapy thrice. He is also suffering from lung problems.

Besides, he has been needing kidney dialysis.

For nearly three months, Zafrullah and a team of scientists have been working relentlessly to get Gonoshasthaya Kendra-developed rapid test kit -- GR Rapid Dot Blot -- approved for testing coronavirus infection.

Dr Bijon Kumar Sil, the lead researcher of Gonoshasthaya Pharmaceuticals, said Covid-19 causes damage to the lung the most and people die because of acute infection in the lung.

In Dr Zafrullah’s case, the improvement in his lung is indeed encouraging, he said.

The team at Gonoshasthaya are studying some other kits. “He [Zafrullah] will come back to us with the blessing from people.”

Zafrullah has been calling for emergency authorisation for the kit for large-scale testing.

The antibody test kit is of low cost and can help authorities with widespread testing and isolation -- the two most important things in curbing the spread of the coronavirus.

BSF shoots Bangladeshi dead

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

A Bangladeshi cattle trader was shot dead allegedly by Indian Border Security Force along Agrobhulote border in Jashore’s Sharsha early yesterday.

Shariful Islam, 25, was the son of Ishask Ali of Rajgonj village in the upazila.

Police recovered the body in the morning from the Ichhamati river near the bordering area and sent it to Jashore General Hospital morgue for an autopsy, said Badrul Alam, officer-in-charge of Sharsha Police Station.

Quoting Shariful’s fellow cattle traders, his uncle Yunus Ali said Shariful and some other people went to India for bringing cattle on Monday. But when they were returning to Bangladesh through the border around 4:00am yesterday, BSF members of Jhaudanga camp opened fire.

Shariful was hit and he died on the spot, while others managed to return home.

Later, the BSF members dumped the body into the river.

Lt Col Manzoor-e-Elahi, commanding officer of 21 BGB Battalion, said a BGB team found the body floating in the river in the morning and informed the Sharsha police.

However, BSF officials offhaudanga campdenied the allegation of killing Shariful, said Nayek Subedar Mujibur Rahman, company commander of Agrobhulote BGB camp.

3 die as two groups clash in Narail

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bagerhat

Three people were killed and at least 10 others injured as two groups of people clashed over establishing supremacy in Gondab village of Narail’s Lohagara yesterday.

The dead are Habib Mollah, 55, Muktar Mollah, 60, and Rafiq Mollah, 40.

The injured were undergoing treatment at different hospitals.

Jasim Uddin, superintendent of Narail police, said there had been a long-standing conflict between Mollah group and Sheikh group over establishing dominance in the area.

Following this, people of the two groups equipped with local weapons attacked each other around 2:00pm.

Habib and Muktar were declared dead after they were taken to Narail Sadar Hospital. Rafiq died on the way to Khulna Medical College Hospital.

All the dead belonged to the Mollah group.

Syed Ashiqur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Lohagara Police Station, said additional police had been deployed in the area to avoid any untoward incident.

Strictly enforced

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Shamim, who lives in East Rajabazar, said an eerie silence gripped the entire area. The usual hustle bustle was missing.

Porimol Palma, another resident, said he could not find any electrician to fix his ceiling fan, which suddenly stopped working on Tuesday night.

Many residents said they stored foods for at least a week after the authorities announced through loudspeakers that the lockdown would be imposed.