

SURVIVING PANDEMIC

Media should get tax cuts

Ex info minister Inu urges govt

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Former information minister and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal President Hasanul Haq Inu yesterday urged the government to come forward and help the country's media, which has been affected due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Taking part in the discussion on the proposed national budget for 2020-21 fiscal in parliament, Inu said the corporate tax should be reduced from 25 percent to 10 percent and VAT on newsprint should be reduced to five percent from the existing 15.

He also said tax at source on advertising income should be two percent instead of four and excise duty on raw materials should be reduced to zero from five percent.

For the telecom sector, the JSD MP said the five percent supplementary duty on mobile phones and the 15 percent VAT on the internet will have to be completely withdrawn.

Criticising the allocations in the budget for different sectors, the former minister said that though the finance minister has set the priorities correctly, the sector-wise allocations don't meet the needs during a pandemic.

"There is no allocation that will open new horizons by changing the total structure of the healthcare

system. There is no statement in the budget on the demand for reform in the revenue sector, banking sector and capital market," he said.

Inu said the original allocation in the healthcare sector has been reduced in this budget.

Claiming that there was no allocation in the proposed budget to tackle Covid-19, except for a block allocation of Tk 10,000 crore and the stimulus package announced by the Prime Minister, Inu said a budget outside the box was needed this time.

"After going through the proposed budget, it seems like there is no pandemic in the country. It's a very ordinary budget for a time as unusual as this."

He said while there are some good proposals in the tax sector, including the protection of domestic industries, there are no major reforms.

On area-based lockdowns, he said although the red-green-yellow zones have been declared late, it was a good initiative.

"But the management work has not been done in those locked down areas and there are no healthcare workers who will work there, he said, adding, "We need a national committee of public health experts, not a technical one."

Sonar Bangla free from poverty and hunger."

Recalling the contributions and sacrifices of the AL and its leaders for the nation, she said the party has been working and struggling for people's welfare since its formation.

The premier said the party's founding day was very important for them as the sun of independence, which had set through the defeat of the Siraj-ud-Daulah at Palashi Mango Orchard, had risen once again by the formation of the Awami League (on June 23, 1949 at Rose Garden on KM Das Lane in Dhaka) as the country's independence was achieved under its leadership.

In this context, Hasina said the country's first independent government was formed on April 10, 1971, with making the Father of the Nation its president, Syed Nazrul Islam vice-president and Tajuddin Ahmad prime minister. That government had taken oath on April 17 that year in Meherpur's Mujibnagar.

Earlier yesterday, the sitting of the eighth session of the 11th parliament resumed at 11:00am, with Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury in the chair.

Freedom came

FROM PAGE 1

"Mir Jafar" (betrayer) group of Khandaker Mushtaque Ahmed and Ziaur Rahman.

Subsequently, the country's progress was disrupted, Hasina added. "There was a time when attempts were made to erase the his [Bangabandhu] name. But it has not been possible. It will never be possible to erase the truth," she said.

In an emotion choked voice, the premier said Bangabandhu had never shared his immense pains and agonies that he had endured in jail in the then Pakistan.

Hasina, also the AL president, said her party gives something to the people whenever it takes office.

"The Awami League government has stood beside the people during the time of their hardship due to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic."

She said the AL was committed to the Father of the Nation that the party would always work for the welfare of the people.

"On this day, we are pledging that we will materialise the dream of the Father of the Nation by making the country

No pilgrims from abroad allowed

FROM PAGE 1

associate industries, including textile, leather, hotel, and medical centre, will also be badly affected due to the Saudi decision, he said.

The Haab chief added that around 50,000 people in dealing with the Bangladeshi hajjis in Saudi Arabia will be affected as well.

Replying to a query, Mohibul Haque, senior secretary at Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (Caab), said Biman earned Tk 798 crore last year by carrying Bangladeshi pilgrims to Saudi Arabia and bringing them back.

"Haji flight operation is one of the major sources of Biman's yearly income. The Saudi decision will affect the national flag carrier severely," he said.

Meanwhile, the religious affairs ministry has called an emergency meeting today to discuss the next course of action following the Saudi decision.

Ministry Secretary Nurul Islam told this newspaper that they would discuss how to refund those who have already registered for performing hajj this year.

"If anyone withdraws the money, the person will have to register again for performing hajj next year. Otherwise, the registration will remain valid for the next year," he said, adding that around 66,000 people had registered this year.

On Tuesday, a Saudi minister said

Who is the opposition anyway?

FROM PAGE 1

proposed budget for fiscal 2020-21.

Earlier during the discussion, Harun claimed that they were the opposition and that there were no other opposition other than them.

Addressing Deputy Speaker Fazle Rabbi Miah, who was presiding over the parliament sitting, Ranga said, "You are the custodian of the House. You please give a ruling on who is the opposition."

"He [Harun] always says they, not the Jatiya Party, are the opposition. Why does he say this?" he asked, demanding that Harun's words be expunged from the proceedings.

The lawmaker from JP, the main opposition in parliament, also said the opposition leader, the deputy opposition leader and the opposition chief whip all are present in the JS sitting, but "he [Harun] always claims they are the opposition."

Ranga, who was also a state minister for LGRD in the previous cabinet headed by Sheikh Hasina, then criticised Harun for one of his comments that the current parliament was not formed in a

proper manner.

"In which year was parliament formed in a proper way? A parliament formed during the tenure of a previous BNP government lasted for only for 15 days."

The opposition chief whip also came down heavily on the BNP MP for uttering names of two convicted persons during the sitting -- BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and acting chairman Tarique Rahman, who left the country during the military-backed caretaker government's tenure in 2008 for "receiving treatment" and has been staying in London since then.

Addressing the deputy speaker, Ranga said, "I think you'll have to call him [BNP MP Harun] to your room for an hour to make him understand how parliament is run and who is the opposition, who is the ruling party and who is the militant party."

Harun was not in parliament at that time as he had just walked out due to what he claimed was the Deputy Speaker's interruption to his speech.

Currently, the JP has 26 MPs in parliament while the BNP has seven.



A photographer being led out of the coronavirus unit at Dhaka Medical College Hospital after the authorities banned the use of any camera on the hospital premises yesterday. According to officials, the ban was imposed after a TV channel recently went inside the ICU and interviewed a doctor for a story on the "hospital turning patients away".

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Hospitals defy govt warnings

FROM PAGE 1

Sathi is one of the few lucky patients who managed to get treatment during this pandemic.

There have been reports that many hospitals -- both public and private -- are denying patients treatment despite repeated instructions and warnings from the government.

Some hospitals demand Covid-19 test reports before hospitalisation, ignoring the fact that it now takes even a week to get test results. Besides, patients with Covid-19 symptoms were denied admission by hospitals though they tested negative for the virus.

The health ministry issued an order on May 11, asking all private hospitals to keep separate arrangements for suspected coronavirus patients.

It also asked hospitals not to turn away any patients if they have treatment facilities. And if a hospital has to refer any patient to another one, it has to inform the Covid-19 Hospital Control Room of the DGHS about this and follow the DGHS instructions to ensure treatment for the patient.

The ministry warned that punitive measures, including cancellation of licences, would be taken if the directives were ignored.

The same day, the ministry gave a similar directive to the public hospitals.

On May 24, the ministry issued another order directing all the government and private hospitals with 50 or more beds to make separate arrangements for treating Covid-19 patients and the general ones.

Besides, the government also held several meetings with the authorities of private hospitals and the association of owners of private clinics and diagnostics over the issue.

But all these have not been translated into actions.

One month has elapsed since the issuance of the last order. But most of the private hospitals are yet to make separate arrangements for suspected Covid-19 patients, let alone treating both infected and non-infected patients simultaneously.

The regulatory authorities and the DGHS seem to have failed to ensure implementation of the orders, thanks mainly to a lack of coordination and strict monitoring mechanism.

The failure has brought to the

fore the issue of limited capacity of the health ministry and the DGHS to make these hospitals comply with government orders.

And it is the patients who are becoming victims of a lack of coordination and accountability.

The death of a 22-year-old nurse of the capital's Ibn Sina Hospital is a glaring example.

Habiba Sultana died in front of the emergency unit of the very hospital where she had worked after allegedly being denied admission there on June 14. She had suffered a stroke on June 10 and was initially admitted to the National Institute of Neurosciences.

Her family members alleged that the Ibn Sina Hospital authorities did not admit her because they failed to produce her Covid-19 test report which had been lost.

Similar incidents of patients being denied treatment at hospitals have been reported in the media since the Covid-19 outbreak.

According to the DGHS, there are 2,200 government hospitals and 5,500 private hospitals and clinics across the country.

Public health experts say that issuing directives and warnings is not enough to ensure treatment of all during this crisis which has thrown the country's already overstretched healthcare system into disarray.

There must be specific guidelines and coordination between all stakeholders and also means to ensure accountability, they said.

They raised questions about the rationale of issuing such orders as only a few hospitals have the capacity to set up separate units for Covid-19 patients and the general ones.

Prof Dr Rashid-E-Mahbub, former president of Bangladesh Medical Association, said that though the government asked all the public and private hospitals with 50 beds or above to provide treatment to both Covid-19 patients and general ones, many private hospitals don't have that capacity.

Besides, the private hospitals which have that capacity would charge patients hefty sums, he pointed out.

"The government's decisions are not viable," he told The Daily Star.

"It's not possible for hospitals to arrange treatment for Covid-19

patients overnight. By issuing such orders, the government put the hospital authorities and the service seekers on a collision course."

The government should have selected the private hospitals that have the capacity to treat Covid-19 patients and requisition those for providing treatment to all, he mentioned.

Prof Maniruzzaman Bhuiyan, president of Bangladesh Private Clinic and Diagnostic Owners' Association, said that following the government orders, they directed the hospitals having 50 beds or above to provide treatment to both Covid-19 patients and the general ones.

He claimed many of those hospitals already started providing treatment for coronavirus patients while others are working to start the healthcare services. But a good number of hospitals may not be able to do so because of a lack of health workers and infrastructure.

Prof Maniruzzaman noted that the private hospitals and clinics provide two-thirds of the healthcare services in the country.

"We are serving the nation in a big way. We are working side by side with the government to provide people with treatment during this pandemic. You should write about this positive side too."

Referring to instances of private hospitals' refusal to treat patients, he said those hospitals are doing so ignoring the organisation's decision.

Asked whether steps would be taken against those, he said, "We will urge them not to do this."

Contacted, Aminul Islam, director (hospital) of the DGHS, said many of the big private hospitals have started giving treatment to Covid-19 patients. But the small ones are yet to do so.

All the civil surgeons have been directed to take necessary measures to implement the government orders, he said.

When his attention was drawn to the issue of patients being denied treatment, Aminul asked this correspondent to give an example of such an incident.

As he was given three such examples, he said, "We have not yet got any written complaints in this regard. If we get any written complaints, we will take steps after proper investigation."

Prof Muzaherul Huq, former WHO director for Southeast Asia region, said the government can use makeshift or mobile slaughterhouses this year instead of allowing slaughter of animals at every house.

"We are not in a position to absorb another Covid-19 spike," he added.

Nurul Islam, secretary of religious affairs ministry, told The Daily Star on June 19 that they will hold an inter-ministerial meeting soon to discuss how to deal with these matters.

Contacted, LGRD Minister Md Tazul Islam, DNCC Mayor Atiqul Islam and Chief Executive Officer of DSCC Shah Md Imdadul Haque said they would take measures to strictly enforce health guidelines in the cattle markets.

But Prof Nazmul Islam, former vice-chancellor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, said social distancing would be a far cry in cattle markets.

"It is really difficult to control people in a cattle market and many traders, who come from different parts of the country, will get in close contact with those in the capital, for which the risk of infection will be increased," said Nazrul.

He also said if the authorities set up a market in a large area, it may be possible to maintain physical distancing.

The government had introduced a designated area for slaughtering animals in a locality two years ago. But according to DNCC Mayor Atiqul Islam, it was not used due to non-compliance from the public.

Three killed in Noakhali gas cylinder blast

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Noakhali

Three people were killed and two others burnt in a fire caused by a gas cylinder explosion in Hatia upazila of Noakhali on Monday night.

At least 16 shops were gutted in the devastating fire followed by the explosion, said Jashim Uddin Majumder, assistant director of Noakhali district fire service.

The dead are Mahibul Islam Nipu, 40, of Begumganj upazila, Khaled Hasan, 45, and Rahmat Ullah, 35, of Hatia upazila.

The explosion took place at an oil shop owned by Mahibul at Chairmanghat Bazar when someone was cooking for seven employees of the shop on Monday night, said the official.

The gas cylinder went off with a big bang around 10:00pm, according to locals.

On information, three firefighting units rushed there and rescued Khaled from the shop, who was burnt severely, Fire service official Jashim said.

Two hours after their hectic effort, they managed to extinguish the blaze and found two dead bodies of Mahibul and Rahmat.

Khaled was first admitted to Noakhali General Hospital from where he was taken to Dhaka Medical College and Hospital, said Hatia Police Station Officer-in-Charge Md Abul Khair.

He died at the DMCH around 6:30am yesterday, the OC added.

The two other injured took primary treatment, locals said.

Local administration and fire service formed two committees to investigate the incident.

'Drug peddler' killed in 'gunfight' with Rab

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

An alleged drug peddler was killed in a "shootout" with Rab members in Gazipur's Tongi upazila early yesterday.

Jahangir Hossain Pinku, 40, used to live in Sattola slum in the capital's Mohakhali area, said Md Kamruzzaman, an assistant director of Rab-1.

The "gunfight" took place around 1:30am when a Rab team was raiding in T&T Math area in Tongi on information that some drug peddlers gathered there, he said.

Sensing the Rab members' presence, the criminals opened fire. The Rab men then retaliated, triggering the "gun battle", claimed Kamruzzaman.

Jahangir was hit by bullets, while others managed to flee.

He was declared dead after being taken to a Tongi hospital, said the Rab official.

Rab claimed to have recovered two firearms, nine bullets, and 1,900 yaba tablets from the spot, he said.

Jahangir, from Chandpur, stood accused in at least 14 cases, including murder, arms, and narcotics, Kamruzzaman said.

A Rab man was also hurt in the incident, Rab claimed.

Curve shows

FROM PAGE 1

rate was 1.30 percent showing almost no change for the last two months, according to DGHS data.

Meanwhile, 880 Covid-19 patients have recovered in those 24 hours till yesterday. With them, the total number of recoveries reached at 47,635.

Among those who died in the past 24 hours till yesterday, 16 were from Dhaka, 15 from Chattogram, six from Rajshahi, two from Khulna, two from Mymensingh, one from Barishal and another was from Sylhet division.

One of them was aged between 11 and 20 years, one between 31 and 40, six between 41 and 50, 18 between 51 and 60, 10 between 61 and 70, five between 71 and 80 and the rest of the two between 81 and 90.

Prof Nasima also said that three new labs started testing samples for the coronavirus recently.

Those were at Sheikh Russel Gastro Liver Institute and Hospital, The DNA Lab Dhaka, and Higher Scientific Research Centre of Dhaka University.

In the briefing, she also thanked Bangladesh Scouts for distributing disinfectants and cleaning agents to contain coronavirus spread.

A total of 680 people were put under isolation in the last 24 hours, she added.