

'DEMOCRACY IS UNDER THREAT'
Former world leaders warn pandemic being exploited to undermine democratic principles, silence critics
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BANGLADESH UPDATE **3,946** New cases in 24hrs **1,26,606** Total cases **1,621** Deaths **51,495** Recoveries **GLOBAL UPDATE** **483,613** Deaths **9,478,266** Total cases

COVID-19 HOSPITALS ICU beds lie unused

Manpower crisis mainly to blame

MOUDUD AHMED SUJAN and WASIM BIN HABIB

When Gazi Sabiha Chowdhury, a 70-year-old heart and kidney patient from Sreemangal, fell in the bathroom on May 31, her family felt something ominous was going to happen.

They rushed her to Sreemangal Upazila Health Complex. As her condition worsened, doctors at the health complex referred her to Moulvibazar 250-bed District Sadar Hospital for better treatment.

But doctors at the hospital said she was in dire need of Intensive Care Unit (ICU) support and so she must be taken to Sylhet immediately.

Worried, her family members rushed her to seven private medical college hospitals in Sylhet city, but none of them took her in. They either said their ICU beds were occupied or they needed the patient's Covid-19 test report first.

Sabiha died that day.

"We begged for an ICU bed but no one helped us. When she needed oxygen, two hospitals even refused to provide us with an oxygen cylinder," Mazharul Islam, a relative of Sabiha, told this newspaper on Tuesday.

Sabiha's case is not an isolated one as many, including critical Covid-19 patients,

are suffering, while some are dying, due to the lack of ICU support, according to media reports.

But when the situation is so dire, a government data shows that a number of ICU beds in hospitals, dedicated to treating Covid-19 patients, remain unused.

There are 106 such dedicated facilities -- both government and private -- across the country which can treat 14,610 Covid-19 patients with 379 ICU beds and 106 dialysis beds, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

But during the last 20 days, from June 6 to June 25, only 78 of them were used daily on an average, data from the DGHS shows.

On June 11, the highest 99 ICUs were used while the lowest 41 ICUs were used on June 22, it said.

Another data, from the control room of DGHS, says 177 patients were in ICU beds across the country yesterday.

Currently, government hospitals across the country have a total of 749 ICU beds. Of those, 190 ICU beds have been set up at 17 government hospitals meant for coronavirus patients, according to DGHS data.

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Exhausted selling flowers and chocolate on the street throughout a very hot day, two children take a break and play in the water of Crescent Lake at the capital's Chandrima Udyan. High temperature coupled with high humidity has been causing people to suffer across the country for the last few days.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

BUSINESS Is foul play the new normal?

Big brands turn Bangladesh garment sector upside down

ZYMA ISLAM and SUSHMITA S PREETHA

For four decades, global apparel brands have been reaping huge profits off the backs of Bangladeshi RMG workers. With retail stores in multiple continents, some of these brands are owned by the richest people on the planet and report annual turnovers higher than Bangladesh's annual development budget.

Yet, these brands have continued to impose a disproportionate burden on workers and suppliers in their supply chain by cancelling orders, putting them on hold, asking for discounts or delaying payments indefinitely, citing the massive drop in sales following the Covid-19 pandemic. They have also refused to share the costs of furloughing or terminating workers as a result of mass cancellations.

As many as 1,931 buyers, including 127 major brands, have cancelled goods worth 3.7 billion USD, as per data provided by Bangladesh Garment Workers and Manufacturers Association (BGMEA).

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FULL STORY ON B1

FALLOUT FROM COVID-19 Loan sharks feast on slum dwellers

SHAHEEN MOLLAH and TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

Three and a half years ago, life suddenly took a turn for Babu Hossain when a fire gutted his mobile phone repair shop at Bou Bazar in the capital's Karail slum.

Having lost everything he had in his shop, Babu took out a Tk 60,000 loan from a bank and another Tk 60,000 from an NGO.

The now 33-year-old turned his life around.

From the brink of losing his income source, he started earning Tk 800 to 1,000 a day. He had 10 years of experience in mobile repairs. Babu had also repaid most of the bank loan and half of the one taken from the NGO.

When he thought he had almost all things sorted, the pandemic ruined broke out in the country.

"The shutdown in our area was enforced so strictly that I couldn't open my shop, which is attached to my house," Babu said.

Making matters worse, two of his sons got sick and the treatment cost was around Tk 20,000. Meanwhile, his wife gave birth to their fourth child.

Babu had no option but to borrow money at high interest rates from two loan sharks in the slum to pay the medical bills.

"They are very strict about repaying the loan. So, I had no option but borrow more money. I took Tk 60,000 from six people," he said.

The easing of the shutdown should have helped him get out of the jam but it was not to be.

He became sick and his landlord started pressuring him to pay up the pending rent for four months, while the bank and the NGO also started asking for the loan repayments.

The walls started closing in on him.

"With poor health, I still go to the shop daily but the number of customers is very low and I can earn only Tk 300 to 400 a day," said Babu, who has no property in his village home in Kishoreganj's Pakundia upazila.

"I will go mad. I can't go back to my home either as I don't have anything there. [I] Don't know what to do now," he said.

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Make it pro-poor thru' overhaul

Call for graft-free healthcare system, affordable treatment

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The country is failing to provide quality healthcare to all because of deep-rooted corruption and lack of accountability, public health experts and political analysts said yesterday.

They called for an overhaul of the healthcare sector. Seventy percent of the health expenditure is out-of-pocket and the extremely high expenses have been pushing people into poverty while hundreds of thousands of well-off people are travelling abroad for treatment because they don't trust the health care here.

"The shortcoming of the sector was known to all, but the pandemic has made it more visible. Patients are being denied admission or consultation at hospitals. This is unacceptable. We need a major healthcare reform," Dr Zafarullah Chowdhury told a discussion organised by Gonoshasthaya Kendra at the capital's Gonoshasthaya Nagar Hospital yesterday.

He said the coronavirus will continue to spread during the rest of this month and the outbreak might peak in the next.

Other speakers said it was frustrating that repeated calls for increasing the number of daily tests fell on deaf ears.

In a recent Facebook post, Awami League MP and member of parliamentary standing committee on health

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Surge in new cases as virus tests go up

39 deaths, 3,946 infections recorded in a day

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The health department needs to ramp up coronavirus testing to identify the maximum number of possible cases as records show that conducting more tests results in detection of more new Covid-19 cases.

Analysing the data of the last 14 days, it has been found that more new cases are recorded only on those days when the number of tests goes up.

A total of 239,883 samples were tested for Covid-19 between June 11 and 25. Of them, 51,741 samples tested positive.

On each of the days of June 16, 17 and 25, the number of samples tested

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Virus claims lives of four more doctors

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Four more doctors died from Covid-19 in Dhaka and Chattogram, taking the number of physicians dying from the infection to over 50.

The dead are Dr Saiful Islam, diabetes specialist of Al Manar Hospital in Dhaka; Dr Yunus Ali Khan, a private practitioner doctor in Sirajganj's Shahjadpur; Dr Shahidul Anwar, (retired) doctor of Chattogram Eye Infirmary hospital and Dr Firoza Begum.

Saiful passed away around 11:30pm on Wednesday while undergoing treatment at Anwar Khan Modern Hospital in the capital, Asaduzzaman, customer care executive of Al-Manar Hospital told The Daily Star.

He was admitted to the hospital after he tested positive for Covid-19 two weeks ago, he said.

Yunus Ali died while undergoing treatment at Tejgaon's Impulse Hospital

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Bristi making garlands of flowers she collected from a nearby park in Shahbagh area of the capital. She says she earns a living by selling garlands -- each for Tk 10 to Tk 15 -- to students and visitors on the Dhaka University campus. But after the pandemic outbreak, the campus has remained deserted and she could hardly sell any flower. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

SWISS BANKS Deposits by BD nationals drop

Analysts say it's insignificant, still a matter of concern

BANGLADESHI NATIONALS' DEPOSITS TO SWISS BANK

YEAR	SWISS FANCES (MILLION)	TAKA (CRORE)
2019	603	5,427
2018	617	5,553
2017	418	4,329
2016	662	5,958
2015	551	4,959

REJAUL KARIM BYRON and TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

Just one year after a rise, Bangladeshi nationals' deposits in Swiss banks dropped 2.26 percent year-on-year in 2019 to 603 million Swiss francs or Tk 5,427 crore.

The Swiss National Bank (SNB) came up with the data in its annual report titled "Banks in Switzerland 2019".

The amount was Tk 5,553 crore in 2018 and Tk 4,329 crore in 2017, according to the report. The SNB report, however, does not shed light on the alleged black money held by Bangladeshis.

Experts say tighter application of Anti-Money Laundering or Combating the Financing of Terrorism (AML/CFT) regulations on banking transactions worldwide and various investment incentives offered by different countries is the reason behind the fall of the deposits.

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