

Dhaka seeks UN support to tackle pandemic fallout

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh has sought substantial UN support to tackle the fallout of Covid-19, saying it could impede Bangladesh's socio-economic progress and graduation from the Least Developed Countries (LDC) category, which was previously expected by 2024.

During a meeting with a UN delegation led by UN Resident Coordinator Mia Seppo on Wednesday, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen said despite many challenges, Bangladesh made progress in poverty reduction, education, health and women empowerment in the previous years but that faces a huge setback now.

He particularly mentioned the negative impacts of the pandemic in the country's readymade garment (RMG) industry and the joblessness of hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi migrants abroad, said a foreign ministry statement on Thursday.

He said these two sectors are the mainstays of the economy. The country's RMG sector fetches about 34 billion USD annually and employs

about 40 lakh workers, a majority of them women. On the other hand, over one crore Bangladeshi migrants send home 18 billion USD every year.

Since the global outbreak of coronavirus, orders worth about 3 billion USD have been cancelled, raising fears of more cancellations as the US and European countries, the major buyers of RMG products, have been hard hit by the pandemic.

If those fears prove true, a substantial portion of RMG workers could lose their jobs, industry leaders said.

Lockdowns and possible slowing of economies in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, where a majority of Bangladeshi migrants work, could also lead to mass joblessness, forcing several lakh to return home in the coming months. This could lead to higher levels of unemployment at home, economists said.

UN Population Fund recently said child marriage and maternal mortality could go up in the country as poverty could deepen and many expecting mothers may not be able to avail services in health facilities.

Too much hype

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"If we can implement the infectious disease prevention law and follow the WHO guidelines properly, we do not need any committee," he told The Daily Star.

Many of the committees do not have any responsibility or are accountable, but an individual is responsible and accountable, he said, adding that if the government needed expert advice, it could simply consult one.

POOR COORDINATION AND IGNORED

The government on March 1 formed a 26-member national committee with Health Minister Zahid Maleque, the cabinet secretary, senior secretaries, and secretaries.

It is the highest-level committee.

As per its role defined in a circular, the committee would implement and review strategies and issue new directives.

Ever since its formation, the committee held three meetings and the last one was on May 30.

Despite being the chief of the committee, the health minister was not consulted when the decision to reopen the garment factories was made.

The minister in public expressed his helplessness and frustrations regarding the matter.

"I have been made the chairman of the national committee as the health minister. However, the decisions are taken on behalf of the committee without our [health ministry] knowledge," he said on April 6.

"Even decisions like the closure of factories, prayers at mosques, and suspension of transportation are not discussed with us. I cannot reply to journalists' questions ... I am blamed for not knowing anything despite being the head of the national committee," the minister added.

Another 31-member high-profile committee formed with ministers never held a meeting.

There is also a national coordination committee led by the director general of Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS). Noted medicine expert ABM Abdullah is the adviser to the committee.

But Abdullah last month said he was never called to a meeting of the committee.

On April 18, the government formed a 17-member national technical advisory committee to tackle the Covid-19 outbreak, contain community transmission, and make recommendations for improving the quality of services at hospitals.

Led by Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council President Mohammad Shahidullah, the committee members sat nine times and came up with various suggestions and strategies.

But most of their suggestions fell on deaf ears.

On May 28, this committee warned that the number of Covid-19 cases would rise unless certain conditions were met before easing the 66-day shutdown that began on March 26.

But the government, apparently desperate to restart the economy, decided to reopen shopping malls, and other businesses from May 10 on a limited scale before the Eid.

A day later, it resumed transport services.

The country started seeing a steady rise in infections and deaths after the reopening.

The committee, at its ninth meeting on June 10, deemed it necessary to urgently impose complete lockdown of large areas based on the number of infected people there.

But the government responded slowly. It first put East Rajabazar in the capital under lockdown on trial and Wari is set to be locked down from tomorrow.

There is an eight-member public health expert divisional advisors' group, which issued projections and strategic solutions to problems.

"We gave decisions considering all health aspects but they have other issues like the economy and people's livelihood to consider. So, in many cases, we don't find reflection of our suggestions in the implementation process," Prof Shah Monir Hossain, a member of divisional advisors' group, told The Daily Star last week.

"I won't say that all our decisions are ignored. But I will not also say that our suggestions are accepted fully either."

The committee recommended not to reopen shopping malls and garment factories at that time and called for strict restriction on people's movement during the Eid holidays.

"But the suggestions were ignored. It was not a health decision, rather it was administrative decision. Now we can see the outcome," he said.

But the government has not stopped forming committees.

On June 27, The DGHS formed 10 more core committees on implementing measures to contain Covid-19.

And to integrate all these committees, a coordination committee led by the director general of the DGHS was also formed.

A couple of days later, the health ministry formed a 15-member committee to contain the virus and ensure healthcare services.

Led by Kazi Zebunnessa Begum, the committee will implement the prime minister's directives to control the outbreak, handle any new situation, and take steps to expand the Covid-19 treatment facilities to private hospitals.



A street near the capital's Gausia Market is swarmed with people and vehicles stuck in traffic around noon yesterday. Such blatant disregard for social distancing is taking place despite the fact that Covid-19 infections and deaths are hitting new records every day.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Virus cases cross 150,000-mark

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toll to 1,926, which is 1.26 percent of all confirmed cases.

The first coronavirus death in Bangladesh was reported on March 18.

At an online briefing yesterday, Prof Nasima Sultana, additional director general of the Directorate General of Health Services, said 18,362 samples were tested at 70 laboratories across the country in those 24 hours.

Since January 21, a total of 8,02,697 samples have been tested, shows DGHS data. As of yesterday, 19.1 percent of the samples were found to be Covid-19 positive.

Prof Nasima said 4,334 Covid-19 patients recovered in the 24 hours, taking the number of recovery cases to 6,442.

Analysing the continuous surge in coronavirus infections and deaths, experts said there seemed to be no signs that the situation would improve soon.

Since the country reported 18 new cases on April 5, registering a 26

percent increase from the previous day, the numbers have only mounted, according to the website of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR).

Asked, experts said with inadequate testing facilities, it was tough to come up with any projections on the number of Covid-19 cases.

The positive rate hovered near the 20 percent mark [between 18 and 24] for last the one month, they said.

Talking to The Daily Star, Prof Nazrul Islam, a member of the National Technical Advisory Committee on Covid-19, said, "The current day-to-day trend seems a bit slow. We don't know what it would be after the vacation of upcoming Eid-ul-Azha when people's movement is likely to increase."

"People are not wearing masks and following other health rules, including physical distancing. I don't see any reason for the transmission to stop soon," he said.

'NO TESTING FEES FOR THE POOR'

At yesterday's briefing, Prof Nasima said, "Fees will be taken at the sample collection points. Fees will not be taken from the poor patients."

Since the testing began, the government had been doing it free of costs. It, however, started charging people on Monday for what it said was to avoid "unnecessary testing" and ensure better management.

Experts, however, said the move would discourage the poor from getting tested. Thus, the risks of further transmission of the virus would increase.

Prof Nasima also urged people to maintain physical distancing to stay safe from the virus.

About the recovered patients, she said they could rejoin work 14 days after they would stop showing symptoms.

"There don't need to be tested again. We hope everybody will consider this," added the DGHS official.

As weird as it gets

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His wife Hamida Begum said, "The OMS list was made after my husband died. Although his name is still on that list, I have never received OMS rice in the last four years."

Likewise, Hafiz Mia and Moazzim Mia of Kandigaon are also on the list although they died two to three years ago, said Jahed Ahmed Chowdhury, a member of Gajnaipur Union Parishad.

Upon the UP chairman's request, Jahed had submitted 50 names from his ward, which includes Kandigaon, for enlistment under the food-friendly programme. Hafiz and Moazzim's names were not among those 50, he claimed.

Some people do not even know they are on the list.

Sau Mia, 35, of Kandigaon said the UP chairman had refused to include him for the OMS rice, even after repeated requests in the last couple of years.

However, his name has been in the list since 2016 at serial number 1165, and he came to know about this from a secret source only two weeks ago.

"Yet, for all these years I never received any OMS rice," Sau said on June 24.

Names of some people appear more than once on the list. For example, Sataihal village's Kutu Mia's name comes up against serial number 666, 680, 720, 1073. Similarly, at least 50 beneficiaries appear more than once on the list.

The Daily Star also found at least eight beneficiaries of the Hindu community with the surname "Sarkar", between serial number 499 to 506, from Talalia village.

But Talalia villagers told this correspondent that no Hindu person with the surname ever lived in the village.

Rather members of the Hindu "Gope" clan live in Talalia, which falls under UP member Syed Mahub Ali Nuru's ward.

Mahub said he did not provide the names of the people with the surname of "Sarkar" for the food programme.

"Only three people in Talalia receive OMS rice, though I have seen 22 names from this village on the list," he said.

The people involved in the list making had embezzled rice using fake names, he added.

Gajnaipur UP Chairman Imdadur Rahman Mukul, who is also the

president of Nobiganj upazila Awami League, said the list was not checked after printing.

He, however, claimed that the list was updated in the last four years but as the chairman he did not do the "file work" properly.

"That was my mistake," he admitted.

Nobiganj UNO Biswajit Kumar Paul told this correspondent on June 24 that this list was initially prepared in 2016 and later some changes were made. But a complete update was not done every year.

He said, "I had asked them to properly update the list this year but Gajnaipur [UP] did not do so."

"We do not get a lot of time so we often approve the lists the unions send to us," admitted Biswajit, who joined as the UNO last year.

He said when they heard about the irregularities, a verification committee was formed with two tag officers and one teacher from each ward of Gajnaipur. The tag officers will submit a report on the quantity of rice being embezzled using fake beneficiaries.

Another three-member committee was formed to investigate those involved in preparing this list, he said.

Local drug firm claims to have made Covid-19 vaccine

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A little known Bangladeshi company yesterday claimed it has made a Covid-19 vaccine and that the vaccine has shown primary effectiveness during trial on rabbits.

Officials of the company -- Globe Biotech Limited -- said they were preparing for the next stage of the trial, on humans, after getting approval from Bangladesh Medical and Research Council.

"Our vaccine is producing high affinity antibody in animal model against Covid-19 spike protein," Asif Mahmud, in-charge of research and development of Globe Biotech, said at a briefing at the company's office in the capital's Tejgaon.

On June 10, scientists at Biotech administered their vaccine on rabbits, he said, adding that analysing their blood samples, they found antibody against the coronavirus.

"We will now perform a regulated animal trial for this vaccine. We will need six-eight weeks for that. Then we will go to Bangladesh Medical Research Council for [conducting] the human trial," Asif Mahmud said.

He said their research was not yet published in any journals.

Established in 2015, Globe Biotech has no product in its profile.

PM approves

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a meeting at the Gono Bhaban yesterday, with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in the chair.

Briefing reporters at the Prime Minister's Office, PM's Principal Secretary Ahmad Kaikaus said, "Our BJMC can't be viable competing with the private sector. These 25 mills can't run properly. That's why some 25,000 workers of the mills have been suffering as they are not getting salaries and dues in time.... So, the prime minister announced the shutdown of production at the state-run jute mills."

He said cent percent dues of workers would be given at the quickest possible time and it would require Tk 5,000 crore. "The workers will be given their dues in line with the national wage structure of 2015."

The principal secretary said the 25 mills would be reopened after refurbishing those with modern technologies under different types of ventures -- PPP, G2G, joint venture or lease model.

"The prime minister gave directives to place a proposal before her soon on how the closed jute mills can be restarted and can survive competing with local and international markets," he said.

There are now 26 jute mills under BJMC, but the decision regarding one --Monowar Jute Mills -- was not taken as there was a case over the mills, said Textiles and Jute Secretary Lokman Hossain Miah at the briefing.

Ahmad Kaikaus said the PM is always against shutdown of any mills or factory and she reopened many closed mills during her tenures. "The prime minister became emotional while giving her consent. But the reality is that these 25 mills can't run properly and the normal life of the workers concerned have been hampered."

Noting that the demand for jute is on rise across the world, he said the premier financed the research over the genome sequencing of jute and promotes its multipurpose uses.

The principal secretary said BJMC incurred losses in 44 years out of 48 after 1972-73 fiscal year. "The cumulative loss of the BJMC stood at Tk 10,674 crore in 2018-19 fiscal year [since 1972]."

"The prime minister took the decision for the sake of the greater interest and the interest of the workers," he said.

Veg prices up as supply falls

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At the capital's kitchen markets, prices of vegetables have shot up by Tk 5 to Tk 70 per kg in a week, according to statistics of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, Department of Agricultural Marketing (DAM) and Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB).

Take for example the rise in price of green chili. On June 30, it was sold for Tk 130 per kg, up from Tk 60 on June 22.

The prices of rice and broiler chicken have also gone up by Tk 1 to Tk 20 per kg. Egg, a major source of protein, was sold at Tk 108 per dozen on Tuesday, up from Tk 102 a week ago.

The soaring prices have left many families struggling to make ends meet.

Jahirul Islam, a teacher of a private college, said he used to spend an amount of between Tk 16,000 and Tk 18,000 per month on daily meals before the pandemic hit the country in March. He made some adjustments to his monthly expenses and brought the amount down to Tk 14,000 as his office could not pay him on time.

"I depend on the salary and private tuition fees for my income. My income from private tuition has stopped due to the pandemic. On the other hand, our college is not paying

us regularly as academic activities remain suspended," he said.

He said he was using his savings now to meet the expenses, but he was still finding it difficult to cover the expenses as the prices of essentials keep on rising.

Hasibur Rahman, a hardware trader in the capital's Karwan Bazar, said his sales have dropped significantly due to the decline in construction works.

"But my family's demand for food remains unchanged. God only knows what the future holds," he said.

In the week between June 22-30, the price of beef has dropped by Tk 50 to Tk 550. The prices per kg of cardamom, cumin and cinnamon has dropped by Tk 400, Tk 20 and Tk 10 respectively. On Tuesday, these items were sold for Tk 4,000, Tk 400 and Tk 430 a kg.

According to DAM, vegetables sold in Dhaka city are mostly brought from Keraniganj upazila, Narsingdi, Cumilla and some northern districts.

The DAM's senior agriculture marketing officer in Cumilla, Mohammed Zakareya, said vegetables were damaged due to heavy rain in recent weeks and that ultimately disrupted the supply.

"Vegetables like papaya, bitter gourd, and snake gourd are sold for Tk 35 to Tk 60 per kg in retail markets in Cumilla," he added.

The DAM's market investigator in Munshiganj, Shariful Islam, said most of the district's low-lying areas, where vegetables are grown, went under water in recent weeks.

"In fact, vegetables are now being brought to Munshiganj from Dhaka's Shyambazar. This has led to a shortage of vegetables in the markets of the capital," he said.

Shovan Kumar Dhar, deputy director of the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) in Narsingdi, said shortage of vegetables are seen at local markets during the monsoon season every year.

"Vegetables grown in summer are damaged due to rain and flooding. On the other hand, we have run out of winter vegetables. That's why there is a shortage of supply at markets, which caused the prices to rise," he added.

Dhar said farmers would be able to grow new vegetables once the flood water recedes. There will be a shortage of vegetables in the market until that crop is harvested, he told The Daily Star.

Arifuzzaman Bhuyan, executive engineer of Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre, said it might rain across the country throughout this month.

"The current flood situation may remain almost unchanged until July 15," he added.

