

Missing girl found after 7 years

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN

She was around 11-year-old when she first came to Dhaka in 2012 to work as a domestic help from Dinajpur.

On September 27, 2013, Khushi Ara Akter suddenly go out from her employer house no 91 of Block-B of Gulshan without informing anyone.

Seven years after the incident, a Gulshan police team finally managed to rescue Khushi from a house in the capital's Karail slum last Wednesday, Sudip Chakrabarty, deputy commissioner of Gulshan Division Police told The Daily Star.

Khushi, now 19-year-old, is now waiting at a victim support centre in Rajshahi to meet with her parents, said the deputy commissioner.

"We have been experiencing unbearable pain for the past seven years. We are very relieved the girl can finally be returned to her parents," said Masuduzzaman Sarker, Khushi's employer and a businessman.

THE INVESTIGATION

On September 28, 2013, a day after Khushi went missing, Masuduzzaman filed a general diary with Gulshan Police Station. He also searched for her in different areas of Dhaka and published missing reports on different national media platforms, according to police and the employer.

But Khushi's father Azizur Rahman, a day labourer, issued a complaint against Masuduzzaman, his wife Shawkat Ara Sheuli, his brother Sayed Ali Shah and their driver Khogendra Nath Roy with Dinajpur court.

The court ordered local police to register the complaint as a case on May 5, 2014 and submit a report. A month after an investigation, local police submitted a final report that said the girl went missing, said District Commissioner Sudip Chakrabarty.

But the plaintiff Aziz filed a no-confidence petition against the final report with court and the case investigation charge was handed over to the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI).

The PBI also submitted a final report

with the court after investigation, and the plaintiff again issued a no-confidence petition. The court then handed over the investigation to the Criminal Investigation Department. The CID had been investigating the case for the past seven years.

After the rescue, Khushi informed police that she forgot her way back after she left the house seven years ago. Monowara Begum, a cleaner of Gulshan-1 DCC market, had found her on the street crying, said DC Sudip.

As Khushi couldn't give any specific information to Monowara, she took the girl home and raised her for the last seven years, he said.

Anwar Hossain Khan, sub-inspector of Gulshan police, who rescued the girl, said Khushi recently told Monowara that she was able to identify the house where she worked.

On June 29, Khushi was searching the area to locate her employer's house. When she was about to return to the slum after no luck, a security guard of the house identified her and informed Masuduzzaman, said SI Anwar.

Masud then submitted an application to Gulshan police, after which Khushi was rescued.

Investigation Officer and CID Sub-Inspector Jabirul Islam produced Khushi in front of Dinajpur court on Thursday. But her parents were missing and the court then ordered to keep the girl in a victim support centre, said police.

SI Anwar said the victim's father allegedly made a settlement with Masud after not getting any trace of his daughter for the last seven years and also took some money.

When Aziz learned about Khushi, he went into hiding, claimed SI Anwar, adding, "We are suspecting that he is hiding in fear of the settlement and returning the money [he took from Masud]."

Police is now looking for Aziz to hand over Khushi to her family, he added.



Khushi Ara Akter



A man plays in a flooded road during heavy rains in Mumbai, India, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Data shows drop, experts doubtful

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The IEDCR said it has been gathering data on R-naught since early April, and it has so far worked on more than 50,000 coronavirus cases and those who came in their contact. The Daily Star has obtained the data.

The development comes amid a continuous surge in Covid-19 infections and deaths in the country. Till yesterday, 159,679 have been found coronavirus positive, and the death toll reached 1,997. The first coronavirus case was reported on March 8.

Talking about the IEDCR data, its Principal Scientific Officer ASM Alamgir said, "The R0 is going down because people are following the health guidelines to some extent."

He, however, admitted that the Covid-19 situation was not under control. "The R0 should have been below 1," he said.

The R0 trend appeared to be similar in neighboring India. According to a recent report of The New Indian Express, the R0 was 1.22 before June 7, but it came down to 1.15 in the week of June 7-14.

It happened despite a rapid and worrying surge in Covid-19 cases in several parts of the country.

Some experts have meanwhile questioned the credibility of the IEDCR data and its ability to depict the real Covid-19 situation.

Prof Be-Nazir Ahmed, former

director of communicable disease control at the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), said R0 depends on data quality. "I don't know whether the contact tracing was done properly."

Dr Jahidur Rahman, virologist and assistant professor at Shahid Suhrawardy Medical College, said, "We can't be complacent about this data. The R0 is low as the number of tests is also low. The data will be significant only when there will be massive testing."

According to www.worldometers.info, 5,070 out of every one million people in the country have so far been tested, whereas the number is 109,668 in the United States, 92,222 in Italy and 6,913 in India.

The government has managed to test only about one out of every 250 people, which is direly inadequate to get any conclusive picture of the real Covid-19 situation on the ground, said experts.

Asked, ASM Alamgir contested these observations and said, "People have a misconception that we don't do any contact tracing. We certainly do this."

He also claimed that sample size did not matter for getting credible data on R0.

He said the R0 had increased after a two-month-long shutdown, driven by the coronavirus, was relaxed in May. "If you see the data, you will

find that the R0 was rising when the shutdown was eased. But then it declined again gradually."

He then pointed out that the virus was spreading mainly by those were not showing any symptoms.

Replying to a query, Alamgir said, "The number of covid-19 cases did not surge suddenly. So, the case numbers will also not fall abruptly."

The lead virologist at the IEDCR hoped that the ongoing zone-wise lockdown would bring good results in the fight against Covid-19 and that the R0 would continue to fall till the end of this month.

He, however, feared it might rise again in August during the Eid-ul-Azha holidays when people's movement is likely to increase.

Meanwhile, Mushtuq Husain, IEDCR consultant and epidemiologist, said, "R0 above one means it is still dangerous. Although the infection rate is decreasing, the number of infected patients is increasing horizontally."

He also said the asymptomatic cases would be at least 10 times higher than those confirmed by laboratory tests.

R0 for Covid-19 in Germany was 0.75 in May, but it rose to 2.88 on June 22, according to the Robert Koch Institute.

In Brazil, the R0 now stands at 1.51, according to the local media.

Danger not over yet

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The Breteau Index measures the number of positive containers per 100 houses inspected, essentially water-holding containers found infested with Aedes larvae or pupae.

Kabirul suggested the authorities concerned immediately take necessary measures on an immediate basis to control Aedes mosquitoes -- which carry and spread the dengue and chikungunya viruses.

NUMBER OF CASES LOW THIS YEAR According to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), a total of 326 dengue cases were reported in the country as of yesterday, 69 of which are from outside Dhaka. The number of cases reported last month was 20.

This time last year, the number of dengue cases was 2,208 till June -- but in July there were 16,253 cases, and 52,636 in August alone, said Dr Aysha Akhter, assistant director of the DGHS control room.

In total, 1,01,354 dengue cases were reported across the country last year -- of which 49,554 were outside Dhaka -- and the number of deaths resulting from dengue was 179, she said.

While it is true the number of dengue cases this year is relatively low compared to last year's number, there are a number of factors contributing to this, said Kabirul.

Less cases of dengue are being reported as people are reluctant to go to the hospital with fever as hospitals in many cases do not want to admit patients with this common symptom, fearing them to be Covid-19 infected.

In addition, those admitted for Covid-19 treatment are not in many cases being tested for dengue, he said.

Another reason is that people are going out of their homes less which means the viral transmission rate is lower compared to previous years, added Kabirul.

Monzur Chowdhury, fellow entomologist and former president of the Zoological Society of Bangladesh, also said dengue cases usually peak in August but can also happen in July or September. So, there is still a chance of increasing dengue cases in the coming months.

So, the concerned authorities should be aware about this and take the necessary measures, he said.

Countries like India, Singapore, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka, are getting dengue cases in Covid-19 patients, he said, so there are chances of Covid-19 patients here also being infected with dengue.

Dr Meerjady Sabrina Flora, director of the Institute of Epidemiology Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), said the institute does not predict a large outbreak in Dhaka this year like last year.

Last year, serotype-3 was the main cause of the outbreak, she said, and as long as a new serotype of the virus does not emerge in the city, a large-scale outbreak is not expected.

This is because many people in Dhaka have developed antibodies for

serotype-3 and this serotype of the virus is still pre-dominant.

Aside from this, people are leaving their homes less and more alert about keeping their homes clean, due to which the rate of transmission is lower than before. The city corporations are also taking various measures for which the number of dengue cases is very low this year, she added.

However, there are chances of getting more dengue cases from outside Dhaka, for which the concerned authorities will have to take necessary steps to control Aedes mosquitoes there too, said Dr Flora.

Chief Health Officer of DSCC Brig Gen Sharif Ahmed said the DSCC has been undertaking mosquito control activities under a master plan since June 1.

"But we will start mobile courts from August 1 to take actions against owners of places where Aedes mosquito larvae is found," he said.

Brig Gen Mominur Rahman Mamun, chief health officer of Dhaka North City Corporation, said the DNCC has conducted combing operations twice since June to destroy Aedes mosquito larvae.

He said they are also going to conduct another combing operation against Aedes mosquitoes from July 4.

"We are doing follow-up at houses according to the data collected from previous combing operations and if we find Aedes mosquitoes at these houses or places again, we will go for legal action against them," he said.

Wari goes into

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A control centre has been set up there. Besides, booths will be built for sample collection and there will be an isolation centre as well.

"Everything will be closed there," said the mayor, adding that pharmacies and grocery stores would remain open.

Arrangements have been made to supply daily essentials to local residents in coordination with the E-Commerce Association.

Visiting Wari on Friday afternoon, a UNB photojournalist found DSCC representatives in coordination with local committee members putting up barriers with bamboos at all entrances to the area.

Earlier on June 30, the Local Government Division issued a letter to DSCC to implement strict lockdown in Wari.

On June 22, Health Services Department of the health ministry announced Ward-41 of Dhaka city, covering Wari, as "Red Zone".

Dhaka North City Corporation put West Rajabazar under lockdown from June 10 to contain the spread of Covid-19.

Meanwhile, World Health Organization said Bangladesh on Friday ranked 8th in terms of global weekly increase in new coronavirus cases. The country saw 26,598 new Covid-19 cases in seven days.

'Wake up' and halt virus

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is available. Some countries are experiencing a resurgence in infections, leading authorities to partially reinstate lockdowns, in what experts say could be a recurring pattern into 2021.

Asked about the dire situations in nations like Brazil and Mexico, which have been moving away from lockdowns despite ballooning numbers of infections and deaths, Ryan cautioned that "too many countries are ignoring what the data is telling them".

"There are good economic reasons that the countries need to bring their economies back online," he said.

"It's understandable, but you can't ignore the problem either. The problem will not magically go away."

While he acknowledged that countries facing explosive outbreaks had some "pretty stark choices" ahead, he insisted that "it is never too late in an epidemic to take

control".

Instead of placing an entire nation under lockdown, he suggested that countries could try to break down the problem.

It could be possible to loosen restrictions in areas with lower transmission rates and still contain the outbreak through things like physical distancing, hand-washing, testing, isolating cases and contact tracing.

But in areas where the virus is spreading uncontrollably, strict measures could be unavoidable, he said.

"If countries proceed with opening up without the capacity to cope with the likely caseload, then you end up in a worst-case scenario," Ryan warned.

"If the health system stops coping, more people will die."

He said there could be places in Mexico and in other countries "where it may be important to slow down or to reverse some of

the measures aimed at opening up society."

"It is looking at: can you control transmission by any other means other than transmission? If you can't, you may not have an alternative" to lockdown.

In the case of Brazil, which counts almost 1.5 million confirmed cases, second only to the United States, Ryan meanwhile said that the numbers had "stabilised", meaning they are no longer rising as steeply, but they are "still rising".

He also stressed that despite "fighting a large number of cases for a long time now," Brazil's hospitals and intensive care units had not yet been overwhelmed.

"We want to see them intensify efforts and we want to see more progress," he said, "but we also have to pay credit to the health system in Brazil for its capacity to cope for what has been a long battle against this virus."

Digital divide leaves many behind

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problem, he added. Dhaka University Professor Emeritus Serajul Islam Choudhury students from poor families and rural areas often do not get private tutors and assistance from parents -- things that are taken for granted in most affluent families.

Akram-Al-Hossain, secretary to the primary and mass education ministry, "The government is aware... and working on the issue of the digital divide. But we cannot solve the problem overnight."

THE RESPONSE PLAN The educated and wealthy families are likely to be able to better sustain their children's learning at home during the coronavirus restrictions, the plan says.

They have the digital literacy to support their children with technology-based learning modalities, it adds. "This means that when schools reopen, children from hard to reach areas and disadvantaged children -- including those from households which cannot afford such modern and costly facilities -- will find themselves even further behind their peers," reads the plan.

The pandemic is upending the academic activities and may result in a complete gap of one year in the worst-case scenario, it adds.

Girls are more likely to fall behind than boys, especially in disadvantaged families. They are more likely than boys to be involved in domestic chores and they are much less likely to have access to a smartphone or other devices.

It proposed a three-phase plan -- short term for six months, mid term for one year and long term for two years -- to address the challenges.

Around 90 million US dollars will be needed to implement the plan.

There should be a contingency plan for a situation in which examinations get postponed.

Special make-up classes, adjusted lesson plans and assessments will be needed to prevent loss of an academic year.

Reaching children in rural areas, especially in the poorest households everywhere will require special consideration and alternative delivery mechanisms, it added.

"We already started distance learning, we are reaching more than

50 percent of students. We have plans to introduce recorded lessons through radios available at feature and smart mobile phones and toll free hotline 3336, to make this distance learning inclusive," Akram said.

WAY OUT

Education of about four crore students is suffering as all schools remain closed since March 17.

The government started broadcasting classes on TV through Sangshad TV channel for primary and secondary students in late March and early April.

Some of the renowned schools in the capital and other cities and towns are offering online classes, mostly through social media sites.

Siddiqui Rahma said extending the academic year to February next year may help. "There will be a learning gap if the students are promoted before completing the syllabus."

He also proposed giving teachers special incentives and cutting down on unnecessary vacations.

Government should invest more in addressing the disparity in education, Prof Serajul Islam said.

BSF kills Bangladeshi along Chapai' border

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Chapainawabganj

A Bangladeshi national was shot dead by Indian Border Security Force along the Telkupi border in the district's Shibganj upazila yesterday.

The dead, Jahangir Alam, 50, was from Telkupi village in the same upazila.

Lt Col Mahmudul Hasan, commanding officer of Rohonapur 59 BGB Battalion in Chapainawabganj, said BSF men from Gopalnagar camp under 24 BSF Battalion shot Jahangir dead inside the Indian territory, about 50 yards off the zero line, around 9:45am and dumped his body into Bangladesh's territory.

He said they were yet to know why Jahangir went there.

The BGB official said they sent a protest note to the BSF and asked it to sit in a flag meeting.

Quoting locals, Shahbajpur Union Parishad Chairman Tozammel Haque said Jahangir went to Telkupi area around 9:00am to cut grass for the livestock. Called by some BSF men, he crossed the border. They picked him up and shot him dead.

About an hour later, the BSF members dumped Jahangir's body into Bangladesh's territory, the UP chairman added.

Informed about the incident, some locals recovered the body from the border area and took it to his village home around 10:30am.

Speaking to The Daily Star over the phone, victim's nephew Masud Rana said his uncle suffered bullet wounds to his left thigh. There were injury marks on his right hand also, he added.

Covid-19 death

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Among the yesterday's deceased, 21 were male and eight were female, while 25 died at hospital, one at own house and three were brought dead to the hospitals, said the DGHS official.

One was aged between 11 and 20, one between 31 and 40, four between 41 and 50, nine between 51 and 60, 11 between 61 and 70, one between 71 and 80, and two were between 81 and 90.

Nine of them were from Dhaka, four from Chattogram, three from Khulna, seven from Rajshahi, two from Barishal, and three from Sylhet and one from Mymensingh.

According to the DGHS data, 43.52 percent of all 1,888 deceased was over 60 years old, while 29.04 percent was aged between 51 and 60, 14.72 percent between 41 and 50, while others were from under 10 to 40 years old.

Prof Nasima added that there were 6,075 general beds and 149 ICU beds for Covid-19 patients in Dhaka city's Covid-19 hospitals or hospital units.

In the country, there were 14,775 general beds and 401 ICU beds for Covid-19 patients in Covid-19 hospitals or hospital units.

Besides, there were 11,785 oxygen cylinders, 207 high-flow nasal cannulas, 98 oxygen concentrators in the Covid-19 hospitals across the country.

As of yesterday noon, 4,770 Covid-19 patients were admitted to general beds of hospitals while 221 were to ICUs.

In the same 24 hours, 489 patients were admitted to Covid-19 hospitals or hospital units while 374 were released.

14 feared dead in nursing home as heavy rain lashes western Japan

AFP, Tokyo

Fourteen people were feared dead at a nursing home in western Japan yesterday as record rainfall triggered massive floods and landslides, forcing authorities to issue evacuation advisories for more than 200,000 residents.

The victims were found "in cardio-respiratory arrest" at the facility for elderly people that was flooded after a nearby river broke its banks, governor Ikuo Kabashima from the western region of Kumamoto told reporters.

Authorities in Japan often use that term before a doctor officially certifies death.

"The Self-Defence Forces have launched rescue operations," Kabashima said, adding that three others at the home were suffering from hypothermia.

Some 60 to 70 people were in the home as water rushed in to the second floor Saturday morning, public broadcaster NHK said.

Local officials separately said another person was also found in cardio-respiratory arrest in landslides in Kumamoto. They had previously said two were feared dead.

Elsewhere in Kumamoto, one person was seriously injured and nine others were missing while about 100 people were stranded as roads were cut off by floods and landslides, NHK reported.