

Macron denounces Turkey's 'violations' of Greek, Cypriot sovereignty

AFP, Paris

French President Emmanuel Macron yesterday denounced what he called Turkey's "violation" of the sovereignty of Greece and Cyprus, as tensions mount between Athens and Ankara.

"I want once again to reiterate France's full solidarity with Cyprus and also with Greece in the face of Turkey's violation of their sovereignty," the French leader said ahead of talks with his Cypriot counterpart Nicos

Anastasiades at the Elysee Palace.

"It is not acceptable for the maritime space of a member state of our Union to be violated or threatened. Those who contribute must be sanctioned," Macron said.

Greece's navy said Wednesday that it had deployed ships in the Aegean in "heightened readiness" after Turkey announced plans for energy exploration near a Greek island in an area it claims is within Turkey's continental shelf.

Reshuffle slows

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Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC), have been consistently asking for increased number of daily tests.

On June 26, the highest 18,498 samples were tested.

Since then, the number of daily tests has been declining.

On Sunday, the number declined to 10,625 -- the lowest in July -- while yesterday's number was 12,398.

This is happening when around 80 Covid-19 testing laboratories have the capacity to test 25,000 samples a day, according to the DGHS officials.

"Every day the positivity rate is increasing. In this situation, we need more tests," Prof Ridwanur Rahman, an infectious disease specialist told The Daily Star.

Officials there have cited manpower shortage, imposition of a fee for the test, and people's unwillingness to get tested as reasons for the poor number of daily tests.

There has, however, been no visible step by the DGHS to rectify these problems. Some people were appointed but not the required number.

HIGH-FLOW NASAL CANNULA

In a meeting with the NTAC on June 10, the then additional secretary of health service division Habibur Rahman assured that high-flow nasal cannula, a device to ensure adequate oxygen supply to patients, would be set up at more than 30 Covid-19 hospitals within the following two weeks.

This life-saving equipment has not been set up at any hospital even though almost a month and a half have gone by.

"They [ministry and the DGHS] could not set up high-flow nasal cannula and central oxygen supply system in all hospitals yet. This is a managerial gap. Many deaths could have been prevented," Prof Nazrul Islam, member

of the NTAC, told The Daily Star.

SOP ON ZONE-BASED LOCKDOWN

According to a top DGHS official, after more than a month-long work, the final copy of the Standard Operation Procedure (SOP) of zone-based lockdown was submitted to the director general of DGHS last Saturday.

The SOP was scheduled to be published and put into effect within days.

However, this has also been halted after Prof Azad resigned.

Multiple government organisations including, PMO's a2i project, the local government ministry, health ministry, and the DGHS were involved in zone-based lockdown plan.

"Whatever happens, the first and foremost necessity is to continue with the Covid-19 activity in a full swing. The government high-ups should take action immediately, otherwise we have to suffer a lot," Prof Nazrul Islam said.

He expressed "dissatisfaction" over the inertia and anomalies in the health sector.

"It [health system] is like a machine; the activities are the result of coordination between the ministry and the health directorate. When there is a lack of this, the health system become fragile. And the current situation is the result of it," said Prof Nazrul, who served as the vice-chancellor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU).

Experts, however, said the ministry high-ups, who were allegedly involved in recent scams, must also be held accountable to bring qualitative changes.

"It is urgent to assign skilled, efficient and honest people everywhere, especially in administrative posts," said Prof ABM Abdullah, noted medicine specialist.

Diseases spread

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The district's civil surgeon Dr Habibur Rahman said, "So far, we have identified 55 diarrhoea cases and we have provided medical services. A 35-member special medical team has been deployed to offer medical facilities to the victims."

In Tangail, although water of the major rivers including the Jamuna, the Dhaleswari and the Jhenai have started receding, but floodwater kept destroying infrastructures in some areas.

In a third similar incident, a bridge was washed away by floodwater on Ghuni canal on Goihata-Singjore road in Nagarpur upazila on Wednesday morning.

As a result, road communication of six local villages through the bridge has been disrupted causing immense suffering to people.

The district's Deputy Commissioner Ataul Gani instantly visited the spot and directed authorities concerned to arrange alternative measures for facilitating movements of the villagers.

Earlier on Tuesday, a bridge on the Jhenai river in Basail upazila's Dapnazar area collapsed due to strong current of the river.

On July 16, another bridge on a canal at Basail-Natiapara road in Kanchanpur area in Basail upazila collapsed.

In Jamalpur, third phase of flood has started since Wednesday and the Jamuna has kept continuing swelling up above the danger mark, worsening overall flood situation in the district. The Jamuna was flowing 97

cm above the danger mark at Bahadurabad point yesterday noon and it would continue rising. Around 10 lakh people of seven upazilas and eight municipalities have remained marooned, according to local officials concerned.

In Bogura and Gaibandha, fresh areas have been submerged as flood hits third time as the Bangal river is flowing above the danger level.

Thousands of people, living densely on both sides of the Bangal river, are likely to face flood for the first time in Bogura's Sariakandi, Gabtali, Shajahanpur, Dhunat and Sherpur upazilas.

The water will increase for next two days or more. Over 1.27 people in the district are affected by flood, said local government officials concerned.

In Gaibandha, water of the major rivers in the district are increasing. The Brahmaputra was flowing 87 cm above of the danger level at the Fulchari point, the Ghaghat was flowing 66 cm above of the danger level at the Gaibandha point and the Karatoya was flowing 40 cm above of the danger level at the Katakhal point yesterday.

In Munshiganj, water level in the Padma was flowing 67 cm above the danger mark in Bhagyakul yesterday.

Around 24,000 families under 130 villages have become flood victims.

The rise of water level will fluctuate in this week and it may cause serious river erosion, said local WDB officials.

Our Lalmonirhat, Tangail, Jamalpur and Bogura correspondents contributed to this report.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina unveiling the plaque of Khurushkul Ashrayan Project, a scheme in Cox's Bazar for climate refugees, at the Gono Bhaban yesterday. She inaugurated 20 five-storey structures constructed at Khurushkul on the outskirts of the beach town through videoconferencing.

PHOTO: PID

Govt to provide homes to the homeless

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a programme marking the opening of special structures built under "Khurushkul Ashrayan Project" in Cox's Bazar for 600 climate refugees.

Hasina inaugurated 20 five-storey structures constructed in the first phase of the world's biggest climate refugee rehabilitation project at Khurushkul on the outskirts of Cox's Bazar town through videoconferencing from the Gono Bhaban.

A total of 600 families are getting their new abodes with all modern facilities in 20 structures, each having 32 flats, constructed on the bank of the Bakkhali river, just three kilometres off the beach town.

At the inaugural function, some beneficiaries were handed keys of the 456-square foot flats.

The premier said the government is taking measures for the rehabilitation of landless and homeless people across the country.

"In the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation, our goal is that not a single person in Bangladesh would remain homeless," she said, adding that the government would arrange home

for every person.

Hasina said Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had a dream that Bangladesh would be a hunger- and poverty-free country and her government was on track to fulfil this dream.

About the Khurushkul Ashrayan Project, she said a separate nice township would be developed at the project site. A community clinic and dry fish market would also be set up there, the PM said.

She said her previous government first undertook "Ashrayan Project" during her first term in office (1996-2001) after she witnessed the miseries of people following a devastating cyclone that ravaged the country's coastline in 1997.

The premier said her government wants to develop Cox's Bazar as a beautiful tourist town as the world's longest sandy sea beach is there.

All the newly-constructed structures are equipped with a ramp system for people with disabilities, solar panels, safe drinking water, electricity, sanitation, waste management, drainage, cylinder gas and burner.

As many as 4,409 families of climate

refugees will be rehabilitated at the site as 139 five-storey buildings under the Khurushkul Ashrayan scheme being implemented by Bangladesh Army on 253.59 acres of land at a cost of Tk 1,800 crore as part of the Ashrayan Project-2.

Since the Ashrayan Project was launched in 1997, Khurushkul scheme is the country's largest rehabilitation project. The Khurushkul project will have four zones -- residential, tourism, dry fish processing zone and a buffer precinct with greenery.

Its beneficiaries are mostly the victims of the 1991 devastating cyclone that forced them to take refuge at crammed shanties in Cox's Bazar airport area for several decades.

The ground floors of the new buildings have been kept vacant so that floodwater and tidal surge can damage nothing. There are also tube-wells and rainwater harvesting system.

Later, the PM exchanged views with beneficiaries of the project and local dignitaries through videoconferencing.

Chief of Army Staff General Aziz Ahmed also spoke at the function, moderated by PM's Principal Secretary Ahmad Kaikus.

Reality doesn't bear out his claim

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They apparently failed to ensure isolation and quarantine facilities for those returning from abroad.

The health minister, in the meantime, kept assuring the countymen that all preparations were in place in this regard and that there was nothing to panic about.

But when the crisis began to unfold in early March, people became the ultimate victims. They continue to remain so till date, thanks to seamless inefficiencies on the part of the ministry and its subordinate agencies, said experts.

These bodies ended up taking inappropriate decisions, they came up with delayed actions; all contributing to further spread of the virus.

Till yesterday, 2,801 people died while the total number of coronavirus cases reached 2,16,110.

At the early stage of the outbreak, the authorities trailed behind in taking decisions on providing necessary protective gear to healthcare professionals. They also could not ensure that the infected ones remain in isolation and those coming to their contact are tracked down and quarantined.

They also left evidence of haphazard thinking while making decisions on imposing lockdowns and enforcing them.

The ministry has also been seen as culpable for not introducing aggressive testing and contact tracing, which are crucial in fighting the contagious virus.

On the contrary, the number of daily tests has declined over the weeks. All these only helped the virus spread. The numbers of people contracting it and the resulting deaths are mounting every day.

Also, right from the beginning, a lack of coordination among the

ministry, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) and the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) has been quite evident.

On April 6, less than a month after the first cases of coronavirus were reported, the health minister voiced his frustrations regarding the way the situation was being handled.

"I have been made the chairman of the national committee [on Covid-19] because I'm the health minister. The committee, however, takes decision without our [the health ministry's] knowledge," he had told a discussion of healthcare professionals during that time.

Then emerged an internal feud between the minister and the then health service division secretary Md Asadul Islam over allegations of supplying sub-standard N-95 masks to government hospitals during April. The feud led to transfer of the secretary.

A bigger feud, however, came to light this month after the disturbing discovery of Regent Hospital's involvement in issuing fake Covid-19 certificates.

A rift appeared between the ministry and the DGHS as the government bodies traded blames over taking responsibility for signing a deal with the private hospital.

Eventually, Prof Abul Kalam Azad resigned as the director general of DGHS on Tuesday.

Dr Abul Bashar Mohammad Khurshid Alam, a professor at Dhaka Medical College (DMC), replaced Azad, according to circular issued yesterday.

THE YARDSTICK
Health Minister Zahid used mortality rate as the yardstick to judge his ministry's performance. He said the rate was only 1.5 percent, but this

statement is also not correct.

According to World Health Organisation's Bangladesh Situation Report, the mortality rate in the country stood at 1.29 percent as of July 20, while the global rate was 7 percent.

The fatality rate is measured by dividing the number of deaths by the number of confirmed cases.

This means fewer people are dying due to the virus here in comparison to the other countries, particularly in the European nations.

While experts are not yet sure why it was happening, but one reason could be that fewer tests were exposing fewer cases, they said.

Countries like the US and the UK have carried out hundreds of thousands of Covid-19 tests, while the number is far below in Bangladesh.

As of yesterday, the US, the worst affected country, tested 50,739,053 samples. The death toll stood at 146,199, according to worldometers.info.

Let's look at the two worst-hit European countries -- Italy and Germany.

Germany has tested 7,418,812 samples so far. Some 9,182 people died so far. The country is now the 17th worst affected country in the world in terms of number of cases detected.

On the other hand, Italy tested 6,354,730 as of yesterday and 35,082 people died, according to worldometer.info.

Bangladesh is currently the 16th worst hit country, but only 1,079,007 samples have been tested so far.

And the number of tests is on the decline. The highest number of tests a day was done on June 26 when 18,498 samples were tested. The average number of tests has declined to 12,398 and it was to 10,625 on

FAKE COVID REPORTS

Rab takes Shahed in custody for probe

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Regent Hospital Chairman Mohammad Shahed was handed to Rab yesterday after the elite force was given charge of investigating a case filed over forging Covid-19 test reports.

The home ministry approved Rab's appeal for investigation on Tuesday.

"We took Shahed into our custody as we are now investigating the case," Lt Col Ashique Billah, Rab's legal and media wing director, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Earlier, the Detective Branch of Dhaka Metropolitan Police was tasked with the investigation and Shahed was in the midst of 10-day remand in their custody.

The Rab arrested Shahed from Sathkira on July 15 when he was trying to leave the country through the border.

On July 7, a mobile court sealed off Regent Hospital, owned by Shahed, in the capital's Uttara on charges of issuing several thousand fake Covid-19 test certificates and swindling a huge amount of money.

Since then, many fraudulent acts by him have come to light.

A home ministry letter about Shahed sent to the inspector general of police in 2016 mentioned, "He is a man of a dangerous fraudulent nature."

Shahed is facing over 50 cases filed since 2008, including money laundering and embezzlement of public money. He has already served a prison sentence for embezzling money. Most of the cases were filed under Section 420 of the Penal Code.

Shahed is also at the centre of a rift between the health ministry and the Directorate General of Health Services over a government deal with the private hospital. The agreement allowed the hospital to treat novel coronavirus patients although its licence expired in 2014.

Sunday, the lowest in July.

Health experts have pointed out time and again that if there had been enough tests, more patients would have been detected, since the population density is high. Besides, there are unreported deaths from Covid-19 across the country, especially in villages.

Some 1,776 people have died after showing Covid-19 symptoms from March 22 to July 11 in the country, said a report of Dhaka University's Centre for Genocide Studies.

All the deaths, however, might not have been related to Covid-19, as many of the deceased tested negative, it said.

The experts pointed to South Asia's young demographics as a potential reason why the total number of deaths is not as high as it could be.

European countries have a higher fatality rate because of its greater number of aged people.

The average life expectancy in some European countries such as Italy, Spain and France is above 80 years. They have a huge number of elderly persons.

But the average life expectancy is 72 years in Bangladesh and it has a huge chunk of median aged people.

The median age of a population is the point at which half the population is older than that age and half is younger.

The median age is 26.7 years in Bangladesh.

Although the health minister sounded complacent, there is no room for complacency. And it is better to compare situations among countries using projection models under the same parameters, including demography, disease trend and others, the experts added.

No decision yet

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Many college teachers are taking classes via Facebook live. Many public universities are in fear of session jams caused by the closure of universities for around five months. Most private universities are conducting online classes to complete their ongoing semesters.

Education Minister Dipu Moni on several occasions said HSC exams would begin 15 days after return of normalcy.

The HSC and its equivalent exams were scheduled to start on April 1. More than one million students are expected to take the exams at over 9,000 educational institutions across the country.

Dipu Moni added that they were considering to expand the academic calendar for the secondary students to February next year to make up for academic losses caused by the school closure.

Other alternatives like reducing the school syllabus and shortening holidays were also under consideration, she said.

Ninety-seven out of 106 private universities in the country are currently operating academic activities.

According to Eastern University Vice-Chancellor (VC) Prof Shahid Akhtar Hossain, the university saw an 80 percent decline in the admission of new students in the summer semester.

"Usually we get around 500 students in the summer, but this year we have got only 100 students," Shahid Akhtar Hossain said.

The university offered a 10 percent waiver on the admission fees for all new student and 50 percent for those with better results.

Northern University acting registrar Prof Kazi Shahdat Kabir said they got 300 students as opposed to some 1,000 students during normal time.

Enrolment far lower than usual

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Shahdat said they offered 20 percent waiver on tuition fees for new students, along with 5GB mobile data per month and a laptop for those who need it.

Southeast University authorities offered 50 percent waiver on admission fees and 25 percent waiver in tuition fees for the Covid-19 situation. But their effort seems to have failed to bear fruit.

University registrar Maj Gen (Retd) Kazi Fakhruddin Ahmed, said they got around 250 students in the summer semester in contrast with the regular admission of 600-700 students.

He said the students who did not have digital devices and internet access hardly showed interest to get enrolled at the university.

Primeasia University VC Prof Abdul Hannan Chowdhury said his university saw about 225 students

instead of the usual figure of about 475.

He said many students at private universities meet their education expenses by doing part-time jobs or private tutoring. "They are now more concerned about survival, so they are not thinking about enrolling at universities," he added.

According to the registrar offices of University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) and European University of Bangladesh, they also get 50 percent fewer students than their expectation for the summer semester.

Since April, many private universities are reportedly failing to pay full or even partial salaries to their teachers and staffers, plunging them into severe economic hardship.

Sheikh Kabir Hossain said they sought loan without interest from the government through the University

Grants Commission (UGC) so that private universities can survive the pandemic and pay salaries to 25,000 teachers and staffers working in these institutions.

"We also said we will repay the amount in instalments over three years when the situation stabilises," he said.

UGC Member Prof Muhammed Alamgir said they were in principle agreed with APUB proposal of soft loan as these universities contributed to expend higher education.

"We are discussing with education ministry regarding their demand," he said.

Currently, about 3,61,800 students are enrolled at private universities across the country. Over 1.24 lakh students got enrolled in different graduate and post-graduate programmes in these universities in 2018.