

Daily Covid death

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Health Services, said during yesterday's briefing.

With testing having begun on January 21, a total of 11,64,195 samples were tested as of yesterday.

The overall death rate now stands at 1.31 percent, and the overall positivity rate at 20.17 percent.

Bangladesh is currently the 16th worst affected country in the world in terms of confirmed cases -- one place above Turkey and one place below Italy, according to worldometers.info.

Meanwhile, 2,668 Covid-19 patients have recovered in the 24-hour period.

The total number of recoveries stands at 1,32,960 and the recovery rate at 56.61 percent.

Six hundred and thirty-five people were put under isolation in the 24 hours, Dr Nasima added during the briefing.

Among the deceased, 36 were males and 12 females.

One was aged between 31 and 40 years, four between 41 and 50, 14 between 51 and 60, 12 between 61 and 70, 11 between 71 and 80, five

between 81 and 90 and another was above 90 years old, Dr Nasima also said.

'TRANSMISSION DECREASING'
Health Minister Zahid Maleque yesterday said the transmission rate was decreasing slowly, thanks to different measures taken by the government.

"Due to those initiatives, 60 percent beds in Covid-19 hospitals are now vacant," the minister said while addressing the Annual Contract Signing ceremony among different organisations under the ministry at the secretariat in Dhaka.

He also said the number of tests has decreased a bit due to the unwillingness of the people to be tested and the flood situation, among other reasons.

"The medical sector is now in the right position. It took some time at the beginning to understand the situation," the minister said.

There is no patient in half of the Covid-19 dedicated ICUs as the proper steps were taken, the minister added.

Govt indecision

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Mannan did not clarify anything but said it was a matter of two states and the government would make a decision.

Health Minister Zahid Maleque, however, on July 22 said the government would decide on the trial of the Chinese vaccine upon consultation with the National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) on Covid-19.

Contacted, NTAC Chair Prof Mohammad Shahidullah on July 28 told The Daily Star that the government had not yet sought any advice from the committee. "You please let us know if there is any decision," he said.

The Daily Star talked to four medical scientists having knowledge of vaccine development, but none of them wanted to speak on the record, saying that it has become a "geopolitical issue", which, they said, should not determine anything about the life-saving vaccine.

BENEFITS OF TRIAL IN BANGLADESH

According to epidemiologists and virologists, three countries -- the UK, US and China -- are now at the advanced stage of vaccine trials. Oxford University of the UK and American biotechnology company Moderna have already begun their third phase trials in Brazil.

AstraZeneca, a partner of Oxford, also partnered with Indian private vaccine maker Serum Institute of India to produce doses.

Of two Chinese companies, state-owned Sinopharma began stage-three trials in the UAE on 15,000 people, while Chinese private company Sinovac Research and Development Co Ltd signed a deal with a Brazilian organisation for the phase-three trial. The BMRC of Bangladesh also approved the third phase trial of Sinovac vaccine in Bangladesh.

Medical scientists say a global race is underway to develop an effective vaccine and ensure national demand before supplying doses to other nations. Any country participating in the trial will obviously get quick access to the vaccine, they said.

They also said the countries participating in the research would also get technological support. Besides, local pharmaceutical companies would be able to go for production.

China also said Bangladesh would get priority in getting its vaccine, claimed a source in the vaccine research community, adding that though icddr,b was yet to sign any deal with Sinovac, it was negotiating in this regard.

"If Sinovac's vaccine is found effective through trial in Bangladesh, our companies having expertise can go for manufacturing it locally. We can get access to vaccine at the earliest. This is

a huge opportunity for us," said Prof Nazrul Islam, a member of the NTAC on Covid-19.

"Also, trial on the Bangladeshi population means the vaccine's effectiveness will be proved on our population. Thus, the vaccine can be further improved for higher level of effectiveness for the population of this country," the virologist said.

He also said the World Health Organisation has taken global initiatives to distribute coronavirus vaccine through Vaccine Alliance GAVI, once it will be produced. Bangladesh is one of the countries that will get free vaccines, but GAVI also prioritises countries based on their epidemiological situation.

"That means, we have to totally depend on charity for the vaccine," Prof Nazrul said, expressing frustration over the government's indecision over Sinovac's vaccine trial in Bangladesh.

The medical scientists who spoke to this newspaper off the record said only a few countries have the capacity for phase three trials that require standard equipment, human resources as well as the conditions where Covid-19 infection is active. International medical research organisation icddr,b, in that case, is a blessing for Bangladesh. Also, infection is still happening in Bangladesh, they said.

But now, geopolitics seems to have come into the play. Some are saying that Bangladeshi population will be used as guinea pigs for the trial, which is not true at all, said a former scientist at the icddr,b.

China has already conducted trial of Sinovac's vaccine on animals as well as on its army. It is also set to begin the phase three trial in Brazil.

"How can that be possible without rigorous safety measures in place," the scientist said.

Prof Sayedur Rahman, chairman of the Bangladesh Pharmacological Society, in a recent TV talk-show said there were globally-recognised ways of minimising risks in such trials. The BMRC has approved the trial considering all these aspects.

"Also, the volunteers for the trial will be selected from health workers because they can give instant feedbacks. This is meant to minimise risks, if any," he said.

"The research experience, if done, will be an asset for us. The government should take quick decision on this," he said.

Prof Sayedur Rahman also said Bangladesh should not always remain at the "receiving end". With its robust growth of pharmaceutical industry, human and laboratory facilities, the country now needs to participate in global research and help the countymen and the humanity, he added.

No Eid joy for them this time

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While visiting Char Sonaigazi-Char Jatindranarayan embankment at Shimulbari union in Kurigram's Phulbari upazila, our correspondent found a large number of polythene wrapped huts.

Villagers in the area took shelter and kept their belongings inside the huts. Some of them were planning to cook using firewood stove while some collecting water and firewood.

The same picture was seen by the two sides of Kurigram-Ramna rail line at Thanahat union in Kurigram's Chilmari upazila.

Banesa Begum, 55, of Char Sonaigazi, said, "I along with my family took shelter on the embankment about four weeks ago as the sudden flood destroyed my homestead."

Asked about their Eid, she said, "All our Eid preparation, including our children's dresses, were washed away in the recent flood. Eid is meaningless to us as we do not have the ability to celebrate the festival."

Another flood victim Safiar Rahman, 65, of Char Gobordhan in Lalmonirhat's Aditmari upazila, said, "Our crops, fishes and everything else have been washed away. How can we celebrate Eid?"

In Gaibandha, around 2.50 lakh people have been affected by flood. Almost all of them are at a miserable state. So, celebrating Eid appears to be a luxury to them.

"We have become homeless. Our houses were eroded by the Brahmaputra around a month ago. Now, we are desperately searching for a new place to

live. So, this year Eid means nothing to us," said Morzina Begum, 35, of Aglar Char in Fulchari upazila.

Another victim Ali Akbar, 50, of the Kawyabata Char in the same upazila, said there remained waterlogged for the last 35 days.

"We can't move and none gave us relief. So, we can't think of any celebration like Eid."

In Sirajganj, flood-hit people are struggling to survive. They too will have no festivity of Eid-ul-Azha this year.

"We are struggling to get food for survival every day. We have no joy for the Eid," said Jamiran Begum, of Betilchar village in Chowhali upazila.

About 3.38 lakh people have been marooned in floodwater in the district.

"We have already started distributing special relief among the victims ahead of Eid," said Abdur Rahim, district relief and rehabilitation officer.

In Munshiganj, around 40,000 people have been affected by flood. Many of them cannot trade cattle for the Eid. They have got no dry land left to sacrifice animals.

"This year, it's quite impossible for us to sacrifice an animal because our houses have been submerged. Eid will pass like any other ordinary days," said Rahmand Hossain, a resident of Medenimandal village in Louhajang upazila.

In Manikganj, although floodwater has started receding slowly, flood situation remains unchanged as all the rivers were flowing above danger level.

Our correspondents from Nilphamari, Lalmonirhat, Bogura, Pabna and Manikganj contributed to this report.



Traders bringing cattle to the capital in a boat on the Buriganga to sell the sacrificial animals ahead of Eid-ul-Azha, which will be celebrated tomorrow. The photo was taken from Postogola Shoshan Ghat yesterday.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

'Suspects' held 2 days before blast

FROM PAGE 1
Shahidul said yes, they took him to the microbus at gunpoint and sped away."

The whole thing happened in seconds and Shahidul didn't even have time to pay for the snacks.

Shamim and several others said the men didn't look for anything else or seize anything.

Shahidul's elder brother Rafiqul said the family members went to Pallabi Police Station where officers told them that they did not detain Shahidul and asked them to contact the Detective Branch office.

At the DB office, the family was told that even if the detectives caught Shahidul, the family would not get any information before three days.

Rafiqul and his mother Peyari then went back to Pallabi Police Station to lodge a general diary.

Peyari said her son Shahidul was a bus helper for a long time and then he applied for a driver's licence in 2016. After he got it, he used to drive buses for several transport companies. Now he is a driver of a Mohammadpur-Abdullahpur bus of Tetulia Paribahan.

She added that Shahidul had never been accused in a case.

This correspondent also talked to several neighbours who also said that they knew Shahidul only as a bus driver.

Asked about the police claim that he was the member of a gang named Shahadat Bahini, they said that they had no knowledge of it.

The family members said they were shocked to see on TV Wednesday afternoon that Shahidul and two others had been arrested.

"How can a man, who has been in custody for two days, be involved with a bomb blast at a police station?" This was the question everyone in the family and the witnesses asked.

Not far from this neighbourhood, Shilpi Akhter, wife of another arrestee Rafiqul Islam, told The Daily Star that five or six men identifying themselves as law enforcers picked up her husband around 8:00pm on Monday from their home in Pallabi.

They also took him in a black microbus. "I went to Pallabi Police Station soon afterwards and I was told that he was not there," she said.

She added that she wanted to file a general diary but the officers told her that it would be unnecessary.

The grieving woman said her husband was a brick and sand trader. She also added that the men who took him didn't ask for anything else or seize any object.

Meanwhile, Abdul Baten, additional commissioner of DB, at a press briefing at the DMP Media Centre yesterday said, "We will investigate the family's statement. We have not received any such information. We arrested them. You have seen the object [the weighing machine] that we have recovered. We will investigate if there is any issue besides this."

Of the three, the other arrestee, Mosharraf Hossain, 26, is from Tongi. The three were put on a 14-day remand yesterday.

Police said they were suspected of being hitmen.

On Wednesday morning, a bomb fitted inside a "weighing machine" exploded inside Pallabi Police Station, injuring four policemen and a support staff.

Police ruled out the involvement of any militant outfit, but US-based terrorism analyst SITE Intelligence Group in a tweet on the same night said IS claimed credit for the blast.

Double blow to education

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These students could fall behind as normal educational activities will not resume before August 31 at least.

"They have taken shelter at flood centres and on roads ... they are struggling to survive ... how they will be able to follow lessons on TV?" asked Shariatpur Primary Education Officer Abul Kalam Azad.

Ninth-grader Shahin Islam took shelter on the railway line in Kustari area of Kurigram's Chilmari upazila. He said he continued his studies at home after school was closed in March.

"My books are inside a suitcase. There is no opportunity or environment to study at a temporary shelter," he said, adding that he was lagging behind in his studies.

Shahin is lucky. He still has the books.

About 100 families took shelter on the Mahila Bandh at Bagura's Sarikandi upazila. They do not have any TV and internet connection is far cry as mobile network is spotty at best.

"My nephew lost his books in the flood. How will he continue his education amid this situation?" asked flood victim Najrul Islam.

Around 37 percent of the country has been flooded.

Several million people of 150

upazilas in 31 districts have been affected by the flood, said the latest report of National Disaster Response Coordination Centre.

According to a study of 'The Needs Assessment Working Group, a Platform of government and non-government humanitarian agencies, 10,000 students lost their textbooks and other learning materials.

The report, titled "Monsoon Floods 2020 Coordinated Preliminary Impact and Needs Assessment", said 807,467 children were facing learning losses.

Academic performance of these children is severely impacted due to double sufferings (pandemic and flood), said the report based on 21 flood-affected districts.

Needs Assessment Working Group National Coordinator Jafar Iqbal said these children were students of primary and secondary levels.

Things may not change that much if the schools reopen after August 31.

Students of at least 38 schools will not have their schools to return to as those have gone into rivers and have been destroyed, according to the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) officials.

Besides, the flood damaged 3,278 government primary schools and 394 others were being used as flood shelters,

with no guarantee when those will be usable for teaching.

According to DPE Deputy Director Delwar Hossain, the flood affected 741 primary schools of Mymensingh, 730 in Rajshahi, 673 in Dhaka, 580 in Sylhet, 506 in Rangpur, 44 in Chattogram and two in Barisal division as of yesterday.

He said 19 primary schools in Rangpur, 11 in Rajshahi, five in Dhaka and three in Mymensingh division went into river.

Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) is yet to ascertain how many of its schools and madrassas were affected, but one of its top officials said at least several hundred schools.

DPE Director General Md Fashiullah and DSHE Director General Prof Syed Md Golam Faruk said they were taking immediate measures to repair the flood-affected schools.

"We will also provide students with textbooks and learning materials if those have been washed away by the flood," Fashiullah said.

Fashiullah and Golam Faruk said once the water starts to recede, they through their field-level officials would take necessary step to repair the schools.

However, how the government is going to make up the loss of months of academic activities is yet to be seen.

Misfortune of a majestic landmark

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According to historian Muntassir Mamoon's book titled "Dhaka Smriti Bissmitir Nogori", Coronation Park, built to mark King George V's accession to the throne, stretched from Sadarghat to Lalkuthi. A smaller Ladies' Park was also situated near the dam.

Hashem Sufi, a researcher and a local of Old Dhaka, told The Daily Star that significant rallies were held at the Coronation Park during the British period.

"There was also a fitness centre named Nobojoog Sharircharcha Kendra in the park. The Ladies' Park was on the western side of the Coronation Park. The latter existed even after the Liberation War."

The undivided Dhaka City Corporation constructed a market on the Ladies' Park while individual businesses grabbed the land of the Coronation Park, said Hashem.

At the turn of the century, Dhaka's mayor Sadek Hossain Khoka demolished the fitness centre and built a multi-storey building in its place.

The current DSCC mayor, Fazle Noor Taposh, could not be reached on his mobile phone after several attempts for comments about the Corporation's plan on protecting the dam from illegal occupiers and restoring its beauty.

Meanwhile, the south side of the dam, including a portion of the Buriganga's foreshore, were filled-up by land grabbers, who set up shops and businesses.

Rather the river custodian had built a temporary market on the illegally filled-up riverbank and allocated shops to local businesses.

The temporary market was later demolished, but in 2017, the BIWTA again constructed a number of structures including a four-storey building on the illegally filled river-land.

The filled-up portion of the river from Sadarghat to Shyambazar on the south

eastern side of the dam was handed over to the BIWTA in 2016 by the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED), said a BIWTA official.

The source also informed that the LGED is now handing over the south western section of the dam -- from Waizghat to Badamtoli -- to BIWTA, which is planning to build more structures including a recreational park and a car-parking lot there.

Contacted, BIWTA's Executive Engineer Motiul Islam said existing laws stipulate that permission must be taken from the BIWTA to construct any structure on the land within 150 feet from the riverbank and no such permission was given to anyone by the BIWTA.

When asked about their plan to build more structures on filled-up river-land, Motiul, also deputy chief director of Dhaka's circular waterway project, said, "We evict illegal occupiers and they occupy land again. It is a waste of resources. If a permanent structure is built by the government, then land grabbers won't be able to occupy [the area]."

He did not answer why they are not removing earth from the filled-up portion of the river and its foreshore, instead of building permanent structures.

NO PLACE FOR STROLLS

The historical Buckland Bund was constructed on the bank of the Buriganga river in 1866 by Charles Thomas Buckland, the then commissioner of Dhaka, and was later expanded by elites and merchants including Khwaja Abdul Gani, Ruplal Das and Raghunath Das.

Stretching from Badamtoli to Farasganj, the dam was a place of recreation and entertainment for the city dwellers, who would take afternoon strolls there enjoying the breeze coming across the river.

Several magnificent mansions of the city including Ahsan Manzil, Ruplal House and Lalkuthi were situated along

the dam overlooking the river. Except for Ahsan Manzil, none of the other mansions are visible from the river or the dam anymore.

The dam is now one of the most congested and dirty roads in the capital. Endless streams of rickshaws and goods-carrying vans create traffic gridlocks all day long.

Several researchers, historians and environmentalists demanded removal of all illegal structures and recovering the land of the historical Buckland Bund.

Prof Muntassir said the Buckland Bund must be protected for the sake of the Buriganga.

"Saving the Buriganga does not just mean ensuring navigability and cleaning the water. The river's foreshore must be protected. The dam on the riverbank must be saved," he said.

Water resource and climate change specialist Prof Ainun Nishat said governments in developed countries construct walkways along riversides, where people take afternoon strolls.

"The Buckland Bund was also constructed for that purpose, not for erecting buildings on it," he noted.

Researcher Hashem urged the government to restore the dam to its original state and set up benches there for people to spend their leisure along the riverbank.

Abu Sayeed M Ahmed, president of Arcasia, said the removal of illegal structures on the premises of Buckland Bund could offer the city dwellers a place to roam around freely in a clean environment.

"Establishment of government buildings on illegally captured lands do not justify the occupation," he said.

The government agencies need to set up an example by removing the illegal structures on both sides of the Buckland Bund, he added.

The writer is a freelance reporter and researcher.

Not in droves

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journey often turns bitter largely due to traffic jams, overpriced tickets and delays in public transport schedules.

But things were different this year. There was no pressure of home-bound people at the bus terminals over the last few days. However, the bus stations and Sadarghat launch terminal started seeing crowds of people since yesterday afternoon, operators said.

The passengers did not have to endure tailbacks either at the exit points of the capital or on highways, nor did they face any traffic congestion on the way.

Major bus operators claimed to have maintained health safety guidelines as much as possible and took a number of passengers that cover only 50 percent of the vehicles' capacities. Many small bus operators, however, violated health directives.

Even though buses were less crowded, home-goers heading for south western districts faced severe hurdles at both the ferry terminals, as floods and strong currents in the Padma continued to disrupt ferry services.

The rush of holidaymakers is likely to increase today as the three-day holiday for Eid begins, operators said.

Crowds were scarce at train stations; only 17 intercity trains are operating with 50 percent of the capacity. There was also no major disruption in train services.

Health experts, however, stressed the need for maintaining health safety guidelines during the journey, or else Covid-19 infection rate could go up sharply.

Mosharraf Hossain, general manager of Hanif Paribahan, said the number of passengers has increased yesterday but it was still unlike other years.

He said they were operating only 30 percent of their total number of buses. "We are incurring huge losses due to the low number of passengers on the way back to Dhaka," he said.

People heading to the south western region are facing hassles, as authorities are operating 10 out of the 16 ferries on the Shimulia-Kathalbari route due to strong currents in the Padma, which washed away a pontoon of the Shimulia ferry terminal on Tuesday.

As a result, many are taking the alternative Paturia-Daulatdia route, resulting in huge pressure on the vehicles there and causing tailbacks on the way there.

A Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC) staffer at Shimulia said the number of passengers, especially on motorcycles and other light vehicles, has increased yesterday.

"The numbers of passengers and vehicles were high in the morning as the ferries remained suspended the night before due to strong currents," he said, preferring anonymity.

Meanwhile, around 250 private cars and minibuses were seen waiting at the Paturia end of the Paturia-Daulatdia terminal around 1:00pm. Some 300 trucks were seen waiting at truck terminals at that time as well, reported our Manikganj correspondent.

Zillur Rahman, BIWTC deputy general manager at the terminal, said they were facing a pressure of vehicles since yesterday morning as many people started leaving Dhaka.

"However, our ferry services remain normal," he claimed, adding that they were operating 15 ferries.

LAUNCHES AND TRAINS
Meanwhile, Sadarghat launch terminal witnessed a relatively higher number of people yesterday as many of them, especially garment workers, rushed there after their offices or factories were declared closed.

"There is a crowd of passengers at the terminal today [Thursday]. But the crowd is not as intense as previous Eid holidays," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

Even Kamalapur railway station did not see its usual Eid crowd.

Bangladesh Railway is operating only 17 intercity trains with 50 percent of the passenger capacity. As all tickets were sold out online and people without tickets were not allowed to travel, there was no pressure of passengers at the stations, officials said.

DMP to probe

FROM PAGE 1
in-charge of the bomb disposal unit (BDU) at CITC and Mahmuda Afroz Lucky, additional deputy commissioner (Darusalam zone) of Mirpur Division Police.

Meanwhile, two cases were filed against the three arrestees -- Shahidul Islam, Mosharraf Hossain and Rafiqul Islam -- with Pallabi Police Station on Wednesday night, said Walid Hossain, deputy commissioner of DMP.

According to the FIR, police arrested the three from Pallabi area around 1:55am on Wednesday, based on information that a group of criminals had gathered there.

Police also recovered two pistols, four bullets and a weighing machine from their possession.

During interrogation, the arrestees informed that there were explosives fitted inside the machine.

The arrestees also disclose names of their two associates Md Jony, 32, and Md Alamgir alias Nata Alamgir, 32, reads the FIR.

Police produced the three before a Dhaka court yesterday seeking a ten-day remand in each case.

In response, Metropolitan Magistrate Md Mainul Islam approved a total of 14-day remand -- seven days in each case -- for the accused said DC Walid.

Abdul Baten, additional commissioner (Detective Branch) of DMP, yesterday once again claimed that there was no militant link behind the blast.

On Wednesday, around 15 hours after the blast, SITE Intelligence Group which tracks the online activity of jihadist organisations and white supremacists said the Islamic State