

Human trials of Covid vaccine set to begin in Indonesia

REUTERS, Bandung

Human trials on a potential coronavirus vaccine are due to start in Indonesia next week as part of a collaboration between state-owned pharmaceutical company Bio Farma and China's Sinovac Biotech Ltd, a senior researcher said.

The launch of the vaccine trial comes as Indonesia has struggled to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus, with a consistently escalating number of cases.

The phase 3 clinical trial is set to begin on Aug. 11 and will involve

1,620 volunteers aged between 18 and 59, Professor Kusnandi Rusmil, head researcher at Bandung's Padjadjaran University, told reporters.

Half of the participants will receive the vaccine over a six-month period, while the rest will receive a placebo, he said, noting 800 volunteers had been signed up so far.

"We want to have our vaccines so we can use it for our people," Rusmil told reporters.

As of Wednesday, Indonesia had recorded 116,871 coronavirus infections and 5,432 deaths - the highest in East Asia.

Make investment

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Hasina said Bangladesh achieved the MDGs, announced by the United Nations, with competence and is now making efforts to attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

"We've already started giving importance to some issues. Development of infrastructure is one of them as investment can never be attracted without having good infrastructures."

She said the government has been working so that all communications routes - roads, waterways, rail and airways - are developed.

Mentioning that the government has addressed the acute electricity crisis, the premier said now the country has surplus electricity.

The PM said the government is importing LNG alongside taking measures to extract (more) natural gas in the country.

With a view to creating a conducive environment to investment, 100 economic zones are being set up across the country, she said.

The economic zones can easily attract larger local and foreign investments alongside creation of huge number of jobs, the premier said.

Hasina said people have started getting benefits from the measures taken by the government for attracting

investment.

Alongside giving tax rebate to expedite industrialisation, the government has taken various measures, including exemption of interest for the import of capital machinery, she said.

Stating that there would be no problem over land in the case of investment due to setting up of 100 economic zones, she mentioned that tax rebate, exemption of interest and the new economic zones would make the country's investment environment more attractive.

She said Bangladesh achieved 8.1 percent GDP growth and was on the way to attain 8.2 percent growth, but unfortunately the Covid-19 has stalled this progress.

Hasina said the country could have advanced further had the novel coronavirus not hit.

"Although the coronavirus dealt a blow to the country, it has created a scope for us as well. We have to keep this in mind...we have to bring in more investment...we have [huge] population and our land remains ready [for investors]. There are other facilities."

Mentioning that the BIDA had a plan to organise Bangabandhu International Investment Summit in Bangladesh during the Mujib Borsho, she said it was not possible to arrange such a summit as planned in the current situation, but it could be done on a digital platform.



The wreckage of a motorcycle under a bus on Dhaka-Mawa highway in Keraniganj on the outskirts of the capital. A man on the motorcycle was killed after the bus rear-ended the two-wheeler and dragged it for yards around 1:00pm yesterday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

No decision yet on major exams

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which have remained shut since March 17, until August 6 to curb the spread of novel coronavirus.

Shahriar Hossain, father of an HSC examinee, said his son cannot pay attention to studies as there is no sign of an exam date coming. "We are confused about the exams as we heard that the HSC syllabus, number of exam papers and exam schedule will be cut."

More than one million students are expected to take this year's HSC and its equivalent exams. For the PEC and JSC exams, the numbers are about 3 million and 2.5 million respectively. Another 2 million students are scheduled to sit for next year's SSC and equivalent exams.

Chairman of Dhaka education board Prof Ziaul Haque said they were planning to hold the HSC and equivalent exams 15 days after a "return to normalcy".

"There is no scope for reducing the syllabus for this year's HSC exams as the students have already completed it," said Ziaul, also the chief of the inter-education board coordination committee.

He said they were planning to hold the exams in the span of a month due

to the Covid-19 situation. It usually takes one and a half months for the education boards to complete holding the exams.

"But all these are at the planning level. We will need to revise the HSC routine," he added.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Examination Development Unit (BEDU) has sent a set of proposals to Dhaka education board to hold the JSC exams.

It proposed cutting the JSC syllabus and placing priority on ensuring minimum basic competencies of students.

It also suggested holding the exams on 50 marks MCQ questions if the schools cannot be reopened by October.

Ziaul said they received the BEDU proposal and were reviewing it.

He said they were discussing the SSC exams and its syllabus. "As we have some time on our hands, we will make decisions about SSC exams later."

Regarding the PEC and its equivalent exams, State Minister for Primary and Mass Education Zakir Hossen said they have asked the Directorate of Primary Education and National Academy of Primary

Education (NAPE) to cut the syllabus after assessing how many classes students can have if their schools reopen next month.

NAPE Director General Shah Alam said they were putting emphasis on some particular measures so that students could achieve grade-based fundamental competence. They were also identifying subject-wise important chapters which were related with topics of the upcoming classes, he added.

"Exams will be held based on the syllabus already covered. If we do not get any time to hold classes, we may cut exam marks [currently 100 for each subject]," Shah Alam said.

Prof Siddiqur Rahman, former director of the Institute of Education and Research at Dhaka University, said the government should take final decisions on holding public exams immediately so that the guardians can start preparing their children in line with the decisions.

Opposing the government's plan to cut the syllabus, the curriculum expert said it could create a learning gap.

He proposed expansion of the academic calendar to February next year to make up for academic losses caused by the school closure.

Lebanon struggles to come

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been damaged. The Navy was assessing the extent of the damage.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina offered her deepest condolences over the loss of innocent lives.

"On behalf of the people and the government of Bangladesh and on my own behalf, I express our deepest condolences, for the loss of innocent lives due to the explosion that took place in Beirut on Tuesday night," Hasina said in a message to her Lebanese counterpart Hassan Diab, reports BSS.

The Bangladesh premier also conveyed her sincere sympathy to the bereaved family members of the victims.

"It is my firm conviction that the government of Lebanon, under your able leadership, will be able to bring the situation under control," she said, adding that Bangladesh would stand beside the people and the government of Lebanon in such a crisis.

Speaking of the Bangladeshi nationals who lost their lives and were injured, she said the government would look after them. She prayed for the salvation of the departed souls and also for the quick recovery of the injured.

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen also called his Lebanese counterpart Charbel Wehbe on Wednesday and conveyed his condolences for the deaths, injuries and other damages.

"In need, Bangladesh stands ready to provide any emergency assistance to Lebanon," he told the Lebanese minister.

Momen thanked Wehbe for providing medical treatment to Bangladeshis injured in the explosion in Lebanon, home to some 150,000 Bangladeshis.

A foreign ministry official said Bangladesh is preparing food, medical supplies and a medical team to be sent to Lebanon on a chartered flight. The schedule of the flight is, however, yet to be decided.

Beirut's governor estimated that up to 300,000 people have been left temporarily homeless by the destruction, which he said would cost the debt-ridden country in excess of three billion dollars, reports AFP.

Human Rights Watch supported mounting calls for an international probe into the disaster.

"An independent investigation with international experts is the best guarantee that victims of the explosion will get the justice they deserve," the watchdog said.

In France, prosecutors have opened a probe into the blast over injuries suffered by 21 French citizens.

Amid the gloom and fury, the aftermath of the terrible explosion has also yielded countless uplifting examples of spontaneous solidarity.

Business owners swiftly took to social media, posting offers to repair doors, paint damaged walls or replace shattered windows for free.

Much of the cleanup has been handled by volunteers in improvised working groups who bring their own equipment and organise online appeals for help.

"We're sending people into the damaged homes of the elderly and handicapped to help them find a home for the night," said Husam Abu Nasr, a 30-year-old volunteer.

"We don't have a state to take these steps, so we took matters into our own hands."

ACC summons ex-DGHS

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allegations against Azad of misappropriating huge amounts of money through the procurement of standard masks, personal protective equipment (PPE) and other necessary equipment for the doctors involved in Covid-19 treatment.

Another letter, signed by ACC's Director Sheikh Md Fanafillah, reads that the chairman of Regent Hospital Md Shahed has amassed illegal wealth by issuing fake certificates. "For the sake of proper investigation, it is necessary to record your [Azad's] statement," it added.

Amid severe criticism and scams related to Covid-19 testing, Azad stepped down as the director general of the DGHS on July 21.

In his resignation letter, he cited health grounds as he has been suffering from chronic kidney disease for long.

Prof Azad had been the chief of the DGHS since September 2016.

The resignation came amid a rift between the health ministry and the health directorate over signing a deal with Regent Hospital, which has been at the centre of the Covid-19 testing scam.

The DGHS signed an MoU with Regent in March, turning it into a dedicated Covid-19 hospital, in a ceremony attended by Health Minister Zahid Maleque and many high officials. The DGHS was aware that the

hospital's licence had expired six years ago.

On July 7, a Rab mobile court raided Regent Hospital's Uttara branch and sealed it off. The court said it found proof that the hospital issued several thousand fake Covid-19 test reports, which prompted the rift.

The branch was sealed off in connection with issuing fake Covid-19 test certificates and collecting money from patients. Later, the DGHS shut down the hospital's branches in Uttara and Mirpur.

A day after the resignation of Prof Azad from DGHS, the ACC sued Shahed for misappropriating about Tk 1.51 crore of NRB Bank.

On July 27, another case was filed against Shahed for embezzling about Tk 2.71 crore of now defunct Farmers' Bank.

Earlier, the ACC formed a probe committee to investigate the alleged anomalies in Covid-19 PPEs, masks and safety gear's procurement.

The ACC also quizzed some suppliers in this regard.

After forming the committee, ACC Chairman Iqbal Mahmood said that the commission will unearth the truth and bring to book those responsible.

Anyone found involved in the irregularities will be held accountable, he added.

As crooked as a cop can get

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"shootouts" surged, especially after a countrywide anti-narcotics drive.

He was awarded the Bangladesh Police Medal in 2019 for his so-called courageous operations.

According to police sources, Pradeep is from Boalkhali upazila in Chattogram. He joined Bangladesh Police in 1996.

He spent most of his career in the CMP and Cox's Bazar areas.

He was the OC of Bayezid Bostami, Patenga, Panchlaish police stations in the CMP and Cox's Bazar Sadar, Ukhiya, Maheshkhali police stations before taking the charge of Teknaf Police Station.

On August 4, 2015, when Pradeep was the OC of Bayezid Bostami Police Station, a police team seized a tanker lorry laden with 9,000 litres of fuel from an oil refinery.

A case was filed against 10 high-ups of the oil company, including its chairman and managing director, under the Special Powers Act for transporting "illegal fuel".

The company denied the allegation and lodged a complaint with the police headquarters. It also said the OC had demanded bribes.

A probe committee, led by an

additional deputy inspector general, in its report said Pradeep and other policemen misused their powers and filed the case to harass the company officials.

Pradeep and two sub-inspectors were suspended.

When Pradeep was the OC in Maheshkhali Police Station, there were allegations that he helped local criminal gang -- Ferdous Bahini.

Introducing himself as an Awami League man, he used to be in the extended AL meetings in the upazila.

Local AL leaders even informed their high-ups about Pradeep, some of them claimed.

Locals lodged complainants against him with the offices of the deputy commissioner and superintendent of police and demanded he be removed, locals claimed.

In 2012, when Pradeep was the OC of Patenga Police Station, he seized a barge. Eighteen days later, police filed a case against 12 people, including barge owners, under the Special Powers Act.

The incident triggered criticism, and police headquarters and some intelligence wings carried out investigations.

Pradeep was withdrawn from the police station over allegation of

harassing the barge owners.

He became the OC of Teknaf Model Police Station on October 19, 2018.

At least 87 people were killed in 48 incidents of "gunfights" involving Teknaf police alone between August 1, 2018, and August 1, 2020, according to reports published by this daily.

Many of the victims' family had said their loved ones were picked up by Teknaf police a day or two before they were killed in so-called shootouts. They had said their loved ones were killed after they failed to bribe Teknaf police.

Pradeep in a recent Facebook video post threatened of "ghostly attacks" on yaba traders' homes, shops, and vehicles to rid Teknaf of drugs.

"Those homes will be ghostly attacked. Some houses will ghostly catch fire. Some vehicles may catch fire ghostly," he said.

"We have taken out activities to uproot yaba traders from every neighborhood like we remove cancerous parts of our body. Our activities have started," he said, adding that house of one Mamun of Sabrang union came under ghostly attack and fire.

Many questioned how a law enforcement officer could publicly threaten attacks and arsons.

7 policemen sent to jail

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Liaquat is the prime accused in the case filed by Sinha's sister Sharmen Shahria Ferdush, while OC Pradeep is the second accused. The others are sub-inspectors Nandadul Rakhsit, Litan Miah and Tutul, and constables Mostofa, Safanur Rahman, Kamal and Abdullah Al Mamun.

Tutul and constable Mostofa have not been arrested yet, said Public Prosecutor Faridul Alam of Cox's Bazar.

Officer-in-Charge of Teknaf Police station Pradeep Kumar Saha reported himself to Chattogram Metropolitan Police Commissioner Mahbubur Rahman.

Pradeep had left his police station on Tuesday saying he was sick, and yesterday morning he showed up at the Dampara Divisional Police Hospital complaining of hypertension and chest pain, said the CMP Commissioner.

The commissioner claimed that Pradeep did not know that there was an arrest warrant out for him until he arrived at the hospital, and upon learning, he expressed his wish to willingly surrender.

Inspector Liaquat Ali's whereabouts had been unknown since he was closed four days ago, until his appearance in court yesterday. Sources in the police headquarters claimed that he had been in police custody all throughout.

Liakat Ali and five other accused were taken to the court at Cox's Bazar Deputy Commissioner's office around 3:45pm. Pradeep arrived there around 5:00pm.

Arrest warrants had been issued

against the accused by the court on Wednesday night.

OC Pradeep took charge of the Teknaf Model Police Station on October 19 of 2018.

According to The Daily Star reports, at least 84 people were shot dead by Teknaf police since he took office.

Citing media reports, Transparency International Bangladesh in a statement said as of July 30, 287 people died in "gunfights" with law enforcers in Cox's Bazar since an anti-narcotic drive began in 2018.

None of the families of the 84 people killed by Teknaf police, have prosecuted the police.

In fact, there have been rare occurrences of families of people shot dead by law enforcers filing cases against officers. This is the first time law enforcers were taken into custody for so-called gunfights.

Ex-Major Sinha, 36, had been making travel documentaries for a YouTube channel called "Just Go". On July 31, he was returning to Cox's Bazar from Teknaf. His car was stopped at Shaplapur on Marine Drive road.

The police claimed that they tried to search the vehicle, and Sinha aimed his pistol at them prompting them to shoot back in self-defence. They also claimed that they seized drugs from the vehicle.

Two cases have been initiated over the incident. But the police account raised many questions, prompting the government to form a committee to investigate the incident.

N Korea on flood alert as heavy rain kills 16 in South

AFP, Seoul

Days of heavy rain could cause flooding or landslides across North Korea, officials warned, as the South said yesterday 16 people had died in the downpours lashing the peninsula.

North Korea is particularly vulnerable to sustained heavy rain as many mountains and hills have long been stripped of vegetation, allowing water to flow downhill unchecked.

But the South has also suffered, with authorities saying at least 16 people had been killed in the past few days by floods in the central region.

Another 11 were missing, while 1,600 people had been displaced from their homes, authorities said.

The North's official KCNA news agency said areas hardest-hit by the downpour include Hwanghae province, a major agricultural region.

"It is important to take necessary measures for the regions which are in danger," said Dokgo Hyok Chol, an official at the State Hydro-meteorological Administration.

KCNA did not mention any casualties or damage caused by the rain.

At least 138 North Koreans died after torrential rain triggered major floods in 2016, the United Nations said at the time.

More than 160 people were killed by a massive rainstorm in the summer of 2012.

Dozens feared dead after migrant boat sinks off Mauritania

AFP, Nouakchott

About 40 people are feared dead after a migrant vessel sank off the coast of Mauritania, the UN said yesterday, in a fresh tragedy along the Atlantic migration route to Europe.

In a tweet, the UN refugee agency's special envoy for the central Mediterranean, Vincent Cochetel, said one person from the West African state of Guinea had survived.

The boat sank off the northern city of Nouadhibou, Mauritania's second largest, according to Cochetel.

"New shipwreck off the coast of Nouadhibou #Mauritania of approximately 40 persons on board, there is one survivor (from Guinea)" Cochetel said on Twitter, without specifying when the incident happened.

Other details about the event remained unclear and some accounts were conflicting.

A Mauritanian security official, who declined to be named, told AFP that the sinking did not take place in Mauritanian waters, but "far from our shores".

No more work

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As part of safety precautions against Covid-19, the government on June 1 had asked ministries and departments not to have more than 25 percent of their officials and employees at the offices. There was, however, no official order to this end.

Since then, around 75 percent of government employees have been working from home in shifts while 25 percent have been working in person by rotation, maintaining hygiene.

The government enforced a 66-day shutdown from March 26 across the country to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus. It lifted the shutdown and reopened all government offices with reduced capacity and resumed public transport services under similar guidelines.

But as the private sector is working to adapt to the unprecedented situation, the government wants to use all its offices at full capacity, said officials.

"We got the verbal order for hundred percent attendance last week. But we have already started working in full-fledged fashion," Senior Secretary to the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism Mohibul Haque told this newspaper.

Public Administration Secretary Sheikh Yusuf Harun said, "All our officials, except the sick and expectant mothers, have been asked to attend office from 9:00am to 5:00pm."

Bangladesh passes

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Sultana, additional director general of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), at yesterday's online briefing.

Some 12,708 samples were tested in 83 labs across the country between August 5 and August 6 mornings.

With the new cases, 2,49,651 people have been infected so far.

Thirty-nine people have died from coronavirus infections in the 24 hours. Among the deceased, seven were female. Nine were between 51 and 60 years of age, 13 between 61 and 70, and seven between 71 and 80 years of age.

The death rate is now 1.32 percent. Meanwhile, 2,074 Covid-19 patients recovered in the 24 hours.

Around 950 people were put under isolation during the period, the DGHS official added.