

Govt set to okay rapid testing

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alternative to the sophisticated RT-PCR tests -- which detects the presence of the virus itself, while the antibody tests look for past presence of the virus and a possible immune response to the infection.

On June 24, the drug administration also published a notice on its website, saying kits with minimum 90 percent sensitivity and 95 percent specificity will be approved.

However, there was no further progress in this regard despite experts' strong recommendations.

Contacted, Prof Nazrul Islam, member of the NTAC, told The Daily Star yesterday, "If it is true, it is good news. It will end people's suffering from standing in long queues for RT-PCR tests."

Health Minister Zahid Maleque yesterday said they were considering the rapid testing.

"Whether antigen or antibody, we will go for whichever is good for the people," he told reporters.

REDUCTION TESTING FEES

The government has reduced Covid-19 testing fees by 50 percent and the health minister signed the official order in this regard yesterday.

"We have information that many of the poor have lost the urgency to get tested. We had a discussion with the prime minister in this regard. Now the fees have been reduced. We hope the number of tests will increase," the minister said after signing the order.

The fees have been reset as follows: Tk 100 for sample collection from government designated centres and Tk 300 for samples collected from

home. Earlier, the fees were Tk 200 and 500.

On June 29, the health ministry set the fees for Covid-19 tests, which were earlier free under state-owned facilities.

POSITIVITY RATE DECREASED Meanwhile, the positivity rate of Covid-19 testing has decreased to 18.72 percent yesterday after around a month and half.

On July 5, this rate was 19.57 percent -- the lowest during this period.

In the past 24 hours till 8:30am yesterday, 41 people have died from Covid-19 in the country, according to a press release issued by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

The total number of deaths has now reached 3,781 and the death rate stands at 1.33 percent.

Among the dead, 34 were male and seven were female.

One was aged between 31 and 40, five between 41 and 50, 11 between 51 and 60 and the remaining 24 were above 60.

At the same period, 2,747 people tested positive for Covid-19, taking the number of positive cases to 2,85,091. A total of 14,678 samples were tested in 91 labs across the country yesterday.

The overall positivity rate stood at 20.46 percent, according to the release.

Some 2,913 Covid-19 patients recovered in the last 24 hours, taking the number of recoveries to 1,65,738 -- more than 58 percent of all confirmed cases.



The kitchen market couldn't have gotten any closer to the rail lines in the capital's Jurain area. Such acts put people's lives at risk and make the drivers' job harder. Officials said they drove the traders away only a few months ago. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Veg price hike

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They were selling per kg of onions (local variety) for Tk 45, ginger for Tk 175 and garlic for Tk 85.

According to Trading Corporation of Bangladesh, the price of all kinds of rice, including fine, medium and coarse, has increased by five to seven percent in the last one month.

During this period, the price of soybean increased by one to 2.7 percent and flour and wheat by three percent. However, the price of lentil has dropped by three to seven percent.

Owner of a stationary shop Habibur Rahman said his income has dropped since the shutdown of academic activities due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

"But the price of daily essentials keeps rising. I don't know how to meet my expenses," he said.

Liton Mia used to work in restaurant in Motijheel. He lost his job in May and is now selling seasonal fruits on a cycle van.

"I can't tell you how I'm spending my days it would be difficult for us to survive if prices keep rising," he said.

The price of daily essentials has also increased high at the district level.

In Bogura's Mahasthangarh Wholesale Market, per kg of green chili was Tk 140, eggplants Tk 45, radish Tk 30, long beans Tk 60 and pointed gourd Tk 35.

Babul Mia, president of Mahasthangarh Wholesale Market Association, said a lot of vegetables were damaged due to heavy rainfall.

"That's why the prices have almost doubled," he said, adding that they sold vegetables at half the current price before Eid.

Khaja Mia, a farmer of the district's Shibganj upazila, said farmers who are not affected by rainfall are getting good prices.

Primary edn ministry

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cancelled, we will hold a school-based final exam," he added.

Meanwhile, an education ministry's high official said they were preparing the proposal regarding the JSC exams, considering alternatives.

"The National Curriculum and Textbook Board and experts are working on the issue ... We will send a proposal to the PMO soon," said the official.

Deputy Education Minister Mohibul Hassan Chowdhury refused to comment on the issue. "This is an internal policymaking issue; I will not make any comment on this," he said. The government is considering cancelling this year's PEC, JSC, and their equivalent exams due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The move came after Primary and Mass Education Senior Secretary Akram-Al-Hossain, and Secondary and Higher Education Secretary Mahbub Hossain held a meeting with the PM's principal secretary and other top officials of the PMO last week.

The PEC and its equivalent exams for the fifth graders, and JSC and its equivalent exams for the eighth graders are the two largest public examinations and both are scheduled for November.

This year, about 3 million students are expected to sit for the PEC exams, and 2.5 million to take part in JSC exams.

The government closed all educational institutions on March 17 to curb the spread of the coronavirus. The closure has been extended to August 31, and it is still uncertain when

schools will reopen.

If the government cancels the exams, any public examinations will be cancelled for the first time since the independence of Bangladesh, said Prof Mazharul Hannan, a teacher union leader since 1972 and now president of Bangladesh Principals' Association.

Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Examination Development Unit earlier this month had sent a set of proposals regarding JSC exams to the Dhaka Education Board, which was forwarded to the education ministry.

It proposed cutting the JSC syllabus and placing priority on ensuring minimum basic competencies of students if schools reopen in September.

If schools do not reopen by October, it suggested that exams of 50 marks be held with multiple choice questions and no exams be held if schools do not reopen at all this year. In that case, BEDU said important lessons of this year should be adjusted with the next classes' syllabus.

The NCTB is also working on shortening the syllabus for the secondary students.

The National Academy of Primary Education was meanwhile working to cut the syllabus after assessing how many classes students can have if their schools reopen in September or November.

Holding of this year's Higher Secondary Certificate and its equivalent exams has been deferred for an indefinite period. The exams were scheduled to begin on April 1. Over one million students are expected to take the exams.

Dhaka-Delhi join hands on vaccine

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Shringla, who came to Dhaka on a sudden visit on Tuesday, left for Delhi about 3:00pm yesterday.

On Tuesday night, he called on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and conveyed to her Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's message that India has deep and close ties with Bangladesh, which needs to move forward.

But as his visit was not pre-announced, it created curiosity in public mind, especially after various media outlets recently reported on Indo-Bangla relations.

Some media outlets said Bangladesh was being tilted towards China, which had sent a medical team to Bangladesh during this ongoing pandemic and also wants to conduct vaccine trial here. In July, Bangladesh Medical Research Council had approved the third stage trial of a vaccine developed by a Chinese company named Sinovac Research and Development Co Ltd.

The government, however, has yet to take any final decision. Medical researchers said there could be geopolitical factors behind it.

Some outlets also reported that Indian projects in Bangladesh were getting slow, while the Chinese ones were being implemented faster.

Asked if there was any tension in the relations between the two neighbouring countries, Momen said, "no country has normal relations during the Covid-19 [pandemic]."

"As a breakthrough, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi sent Secretary Shringla [to Dhaka]. India gives special importance on relations with Bangladesh. Therefore, they first chose Bangladesh for the visit during the pandemic."

On the media reporting on Bangladesh-India relations in recent times, Momen said, "We agreed that we will give messages to the mainstream media on the progress of our relations. We saw during the Covid-19 that we could not interact with you."

Both foreign secretaries agreed to call upon their respective media communities to play more responsible roles in this regard, he said.

Asked if they discussed the Teesta water sharing issue and a recent media report that India is concerned over a possible irrigation project in the Teesta river with Chinese loan, Momen said, "No".

BORDER KILLINGS

Bangladesh has expressed deep concern over the rise in killings at the Indo-Bangla border by BSF/ Indian nationals during the first half of this year.

Momen did not give any figure, but rights body Ain o Salish Kendra said at least 43 Bangladeshis were killed by the BSF in 2019. The number was 15 in 2018, 24 in 2017, and 31 in 2016.

"Bangladesh flagged that this is in violation of all bilateral agreements and that the Indian Border Security Force must be duly urged to exercise maximum restraint," the Bangladesh foreign ministry said in a statement yesterday.

The Indian side assured that the BSF authorities had been sensitized of the matter and that the issue would be discussed in detail at the DG-level talks between BGB and BSF to be hosted by Dhaka next month.

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Now the land port is being opened slowly. Besides, the trial run of transshipment from India via Bangladesh's sea and land to Northeast India was conducted as well.

However, there are many other mechanisms in power sector, infrastructure, and Indian Line of Credit. Those have somewhat got halted because many Indian experts had to return to their country after the outbreak. They now started coming back, he said.

He said Bangladesh was actively considering India's proposal of air bubble agreement allowing air travel between the two countries. India is also

doing it with some other countries, including its neighbours.

"In that case, many Bangladeshis going to India for critical treatment can start going there. Besides, Indian consultants working in Bangladeshi projects can also return. As our economy revives, they can come and join work," he said.

Dhaka and Delhi also decided to hold ministerial level Joint Consultative Committee meeting at the soonest where they can assess the progress of various line ministry projects that need impetus. The meeting, whose date will be declared soon, can provide guidelines to that end, the foreign secretary said.

Shringla also invited Momen to visit India.

At the meeting, Dhaka also pointed out some Bangladeshis, including 26 fishermen and over a 100 Taglibi Jamaat members, have been stranded in India amid the pandemic. He sought India's cooperation for their repatriation, which was responded positively.

'PURSUE MYANMAR FOR ROHINGYA REPATRIATION'

Momen said India has been elected non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, and Bangladesh supported India. From January next, India will take sit at the Council that discusses important global issues.

"Our issue of concern is the Rohingyas. In the past, we tried hard for passage of a resolution on the Rohingya issue, but it did not happen due some permanent members' reservation," he said, adding that Bangladesh sought India's assistance in making that happen in the future.

Forced out of Myanmar, more than a million Rohingyas are now sheltered in Cox's Bazar.

Momen said India has good relations with Myanmar and is building infrastructure in Rakhine for the Rohingyas. "We requested India also to pursue Myanmar for Rohingya repatriation," he said.

"In the light of close relations with Bangladesh, India has promised to help Bangladesh to this end," he added.

Flood response inadequate, faulty

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build those," said eminent water resource expert and Professor emeritus of BRAC University Dr Ainun Nishat, one of those who spoke in the session.

"The government starts to repair the embankments just before monsoon or during monsoon with concrete blocks and sandbags which get simply washed away when the floodwater comes. In many places, funds to repair the embankments are not sanctioned in time. In many districts, embankments that were damaged in the last year's flood have yet been repaired. In this way, huge amounts of public money are being wasted fruitlessly. We want a sustainable solution for building and repairing the embankments," she added.

The study found that as of August 2, USD 42 million worth crops, USD 74.5 million worth livestock, 125,549 hectares of agricultural land and 16, 537 hectares of grass land were damaged by the ongoing flood.

In addition to these infrastructures,

more than 1900 school buildings, 73,343 sanitary latrines and 81,179 tube wells have been damaged.

During the session, eminent educationist and former adviser to the caretaker government Rasheda K Choudhury said, "Locations for constructing school buildings should be selected intelligently. It should be constructed at a safe distance from the eroding riverbanks. Due to destruction of school buildings, tens of thousands of school children are at risk of dropping out from the school."

The study also revealed inadequacy and irregularities in the volume of relief distribution.

It said the two relief and rehabilitation programmes announced by the government to control flood damage was only 3.6 percent of the total agricultural rehabilitation budget of the current fiscal year.

"Local union parishad chairman usually arranges relief distribution, which often results in decision making

that is not inclusive and is informed by biases," the study also stated.

CPD Executive Director Dr Fahmida Khatun said, "Despite the long duration of floods, there are significant limitations on the government side in terms of relief distribution and implementation of rehabilitation programmes. The NGOs also could not respond promptly enough due to Covid-19 related health and mobility restrictions."

Dr Enamur Rahman, state minister for disaster management for relief and rehabilitation, denied the claim.

"There is no irregularity or inadequacy in relief distribution. The government has extended all-out efforts to rehabilitate the affected people. The claim about bias in relief distribution is not right at all," he said. "We are delivering food and cash assistance to all affected people. We have opened a 24/7 helpline so that anyone who needs assistance can contact us."

Shipra to decide on filing case after HC rule

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lawyer were going to Ramu to file the case but returned after learning about the HC hearing the writ yesterday.

Mahbubul said Shipra's personal photos were posted on social media sites, including YouTube, after doctored and editing those in an offensive way.

On Sunday, Supreme Court lawyer Manoj Kumar Bhowmik submitted the petition as a public interest litigation, seeking its order on the authorities concerned of the government to conduct a probe. He said the action of the two police officials was illegal.

He submitted the writ based on a report published by The Daily Star on Sunday with the headline "Cyberbullying now adds to her trauma".

Talking to this correspondent after yesterday's hearing, Manoj said, "The court wanted to know whether I have the right to file the case on behalf of Shipra and why Shipra couldn't come to the court."

"I told the court that Shipra has no scope to come to Dhaka as she is apparently confined following security issues. I talked to her [over phone] last night."

"It's not only a matter of Shipra, but also a public matter, including the women of our country. It's a matter of constitution and it's a matter of human rights," he said.

SPs Mostafizur Rahman of Satkhira and Mohammad Mizanur Rahman Shelley of Dhaka Metro South of the Police Bureau of Investigation would be accused in the case along with 100-150 others, the lawyer said.

Shipra was accused in a narcotics case following the killing of Maj Sinha. She along with two other students of her university and Sinha went to Cox's Bazar on July 3 to make a travel documentary.

Maj Sinha was killed in police firing on July 31 at Shamlapur police checkpoint, triggering an outcry.

Shipra was arrested at a Cox's Bazar resort for possessing liquor and marijuana and was released on bail amid widespread protests.

The police had seized personal digital devices in her possession.

Since her release, she has been exposed to cyberbullying. The two SPs posted Shipra's personal photos on social media, taking a dig at her character, alleged her family members.

On Monday, Shipra in a video statement alleged that police went to their resort after Maj Sinha's murder and seized both their laptops, three hard drives, mobile phones, desktop PCs, cameras, and lenses.

She vowed to sue the people involved in releasing the photos in those devices.

Meanwhile, a Cox's Bazar court yesterday directed Ramu police to hand over 29 types of items seized from Shipra, including mobile phones, laptops, hard drives, to Rab, which is investigating the murder case.

Two girls gang-raped in Thakurgaon

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Thakurgaon

A Thakurgaon court yesterday sent two men to jail for their allegedly involvement in the gang-rape of two teenage girls in the district's Pirganj upazila.

The accused are Nayan Islam, 22, of Senua Baniapra village, and Mohammad Sabuj, 20, of Bhamradaha Chilapara village in the upazila, said police.

Khairul Anam, inspector (investigation) of Pirganj Police Station, said the duo was sent to jail after the court of Senior Judicial Magistrate Marjia Khatun recorded their statement.

They were arrested on Tuesday night after one Abu Sultan filed a rape case against five persons.

According to the case statement, the victims went to Pirganj town on Monday to purchase a cell phone battery.

In the market, the victims met Nayan and went to Lahagara Bazar on his suggestion as they knew each other from before. Three more men -- Hiren Chandra Shil, 26, Farid Hossain, 22, and Selim, 22 -- also went to the Bazar with Nayan.

Later, Hiren offered the girls potato chips and juice, made them unconscious and took them to Sabuj's house. The accused then raped the girls repeatedly and left them on a nearby rail track at Bhamradaha village on Tuesday.

Returning home, the girls shared their experience with their family members who later informed police about it, the OC said.

Police are conducting drives to nab the rest accused, he added.

Flood damages

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November remains, which could hamper rice production, he added.

"If there is drought, Aman paddy would develop blast. On the other hand, there are instances that storms hit the country in November."

Razzaque, however, insisted that there would be no food shortage in the country.

Replying to a question, Agriculture Secretary Md Nasiruzzaman said they are estimating that the production of Aman paddy would drop by one lakh tonnes this year.

"But we've harvested three lakh tonnes of surplus Aush crop. Therefore, we won't face any shortage," the secretary said.

The minister said floods hit the country thrice this year. In the first phase, 14 districts were affected between June 25 and July 9. About 343,957 farmers were affected and crops worth about Tk 349 crore damaged.

In the second and third phases, Razzaque said, 37 districts were hit by flooding between July 11 and August 12. About 929,194 farmers were affected and crops worth about Tk 974 crore damaged.

Aush paddy on 32,213 hectares, Aman on 70,820 hectares, and Aman seedbeds on 7,918 hectares were worst affected in the floods, according to agriculture ministry statistics.

The minister said they have already taken up a Tk 17.54 crore rehabilitation programme for 239,631 farmers. As part of the programme, they have begun distributing vegetable seeds among 151,600 farmers.

He said his ministry has planned to launch free distribution of black gram seeds among farmers in some flood-hit areas if they cannot cultivate Aman. "Black gram seeds worth about Tk 3.82 crore will be distributed among 50,000 farmers."

Besides, the ministry has planned to provide free agricultural materials to 929,194 farmers to grow wheat, mustard, ground nuts, sunflower, lentils, onion, chili, and tomato.

The programme is in the works and the ministry will need another Tk 65 crore to implement it, Razzaque said.

Earlier, Rab appealed to the court to get the items in their custody as they are investigating the case.

Meanwhile, Abul Khair, officer-in-charge of Ramu Police Station, claimed that there was no scope to leak photos and videos from seized electronic devices.

The OC told reporters that they made two seizure lists following the drive at the resort. One was for the narcotics case and the other for personal items they seized through a general diary, he added.

Asked, he said that they informed the court about the seized items including devices in the police station's custody.

SP Mostafizur could not be reached for comments on his phone despite several attempts.

PBI SP Shelley said, "Yes, such comments can be made [by police]. What's the problem?"

"I didn't take the photos. She posted those pictures publicly herself on her different social media. You can see the links ..."