

Covid cases now 1,944 per million

Says DGHS; global average 3,565; 41 die, 1,827 infected in a day

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

There are 1,944 Covid-19 patients per million people in the country, the health directorate said yesterday.

With 1,827 new reported positive cases, the total confirmed cases reached 3,31,078.

Globally, there are 3,565 cases per million population, according to worldometers.info.

The percentage of samples that tested positive (positivity rate) in the country was 12.38 in the 24 hours preceding 8:30am yesterday, said a release from the Directorate General of Health Services.

The positivity rate was 12.64 percent the day before.

The directorate reported 41 people dead with the disease. The total number of deaths rose to 4,593 which is 1.39 percent of all confirmed cases.

Twelve of the deceased were female and the rest were male. One was aged below 10, one each were from the age group 21-30 and 31-40, while four were aged between 41 and 50, 10 between 41 and 50, and 24 were over 60.

Seventeen were from Dhaka, six from Chattogram, four from Khulna, one each from Barishal and Mymensingh, five from Rajshahi, two from Sylhet and five from Rangpur divisions.

With 2,995 people recovering from the disease, the total number of recoveries rose to 2,30,804 -- nearly 70 percent of all confirmed cases.

As of yesterday morning, a total of 3,444 patients were undergoing treatment in general beds and 301 in ICUs in Covid-19 dedicated hospitals.

Man shot dead in Rangamati

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Rangamati

A man was shot dead by a group of unidentified miscreants in Rangamati's Naniarchar upazila around 10:00pm on Tuesday.

The dead Suresh Kumar Chakma, of Ghilachhari union's Shialya Para area, owned a tea stall beside Rangamati-Khagrachhari road in the union, said police.

A group of criminals shot Suresh at his tea stall, leaving him dead on the spot, said locals. They also suspected that the murder had taken place for Suresh's denial to extortion.

Police recovered the body yesterday morning and sent it to Rangamati General Hospital for autopsy.

The body was then handed over to the deceased's relatives.

Muhammad Sabbir Hossain, officer-in-charge of Naniarchar Police Station, said they were yet to confirm the reason behind the murder.

No one lodged any complaint with police in this regard, he added.

Pay Tk 5 lakh for each victim

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The court also issued a rule asking the authorities concerned of the government and Titas Gas to explain why the authorities of Titas Gas should not be directed to give Tk 50 lakh to each of the victims' family.

The court said it will hear the rule after the probe committees formed by the government submit their reports on the incident.

The HC bench of Justice JBM Hassan and Justice Md Khairul Alam came up with order and rule following a writ petition that sought its directive on the Titas Gas authorities to compensate Tk 50 lakh to each family of the victims.

Supreme Court lawyer and a resident of Narayanganj Mar-um Khondaker submitted the petition as a public interest litigation to the HC on Monday.

In the petition, she prayed to the HC to order the government to identify the persons responsible for the negligence in repairing the gas pipeline which reportedly caused the explosion.

The petitioner requested the HC to direct the authorities concerned to regularly check the utility service lines, including those of gas, electricity and water, across the country and take necessary measures to repair if there is any defect in the lines.

Mar-um Khondaker said Titas Gas officials have reportedly sought Tk 50,000 from the mosque committee to repair the leak in the gas pipeline. Titas did not repair it as its officials were not given the money, she stated in the petition.

Twenty-eight people have so far died and several others sustained burns in the blast at Pashchim Talla Baitus Salam Mosque after Esha prayers on Friday night.

There has been widespread allegation that the explosion was caused by gas that leaked from underground pipeline and accumulated inside the ground floor of the mosque.

Taimur Alam Khondker appeared for the petitioner, while Deputy Attorney General Nur Us Sadik represented the state.



Family members of deceased Jonny are happy that justice was finally served after a Dhaka court delivered the verdict in the custodial death case yesterday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

THE 5 ACCUSED



SI Zahid

Qamruzzaman

Rashedul

Sumon

Russell

Justice catches up with killer cops

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Justice was served.

It was the first verdict under the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, 2013.

Judge KM Emrul Kayesh of Metropolitan Sessions Judges Court sentenced three ex-policemen of the capital's Pallabi Police Station to life imprisonment and two other accused to seven years' in jail in the case filed over the custodial death of Jonny.

The three policemen are former sub-inspector Jahidur Rahman, and former assistant sub-inspectors Qamruzzaman Mintu and Rashedul Islam. The two other sentenced were police informants Sumon and Russell.

Of them, Jahid and Sumon are in jail, Rashed is out on bail while Mintu and Russell are on the run.

"The highest punishment allowed in this law is life sentence -- not death -- and that is what I am pronouncing today," said Judge Kayesh in his observation.

"When custodial torture by law enforcers happens, nobody witnesses it except the victim and the God. This verdict was possible because Jonny's uncles were also detained and were in the same police station cell. They saw the torture happen," said Judge Kayesh.

"We have examined 24 witnesses. Of the accused, only Jahid submitted a self-defence statement, while the rest refused," he added.

On February 7, 2014, a police team led by SI Jahidur picked up Rocky and Jonny from the capital's Pallabi Irani Camp area along with some others from a pre-wedding programme.

They were tortured inside the Pallabi Police Station for around two and a half hours after which Jonny lost consciousness. He was taken to a local clinic, where he died of his injuries.

He was only 28.

Judge Kayesh called the torture by the police "heinous".

As he shared some details of the torture on the brothers with the courtroom, Rocky started to tear up.

"At one point when Jonny asked for

some water, Jahid spat on his face and said, 'Here, drink this' ... This is a violation of human rights," observed Judge Kayesh.

The court also fined the three policemen Tk 1 lakh each, in default of which they will have to serve six more months in prison. It also fined the two other convicts Tk 20,000 each, in default of which they will serve three more months in prison.

Besides, the court asked the three police officers to pay Tk 2 lakh each to the plaintiff as compensation.

The trio will have to pay the compensation within 14 days, otherwise they will not be able to file an appeal against the verdict with the High Court.

"I am disposing of this case today after undergoing many ups and downs," observed Judge Kayesh.

"Ups and downs" is the right phrase that describes the ordeal of Rocky, who fought tirelessly for justice for his brother.

His family has constantly been facing threats for the last six and a half years since Jonny was tortured to death.

"The day I filed the case with the court on August 7, 2014, I was threatened. I was on my way back home from the court when I was called up by a local political influential person, who threatened me for daring to file a case against the police," described Rocky. "That was only the beginning."

They were continuously called and approached by accused Rashed and Mintu, who had been out on bail since 2015, claimed Rocky.

Meanwhile, even though Jahid was in jail it came as little comfort for Rocky since his "well-wishers" continued to harass him, he alleged.

"Rashed and Mintu came to my house in July 2017. They offered me Tk 20 lakh to back off, but I did not agree to do that. At this, they threatened me and left," he said, showing an old news clipping of that event as proof.

He also described how he had gone to the police stations of specialised

branches and upon going there, said, 'Here, drink this' ... This is a violation of human rights," observed Judge Kayesh.

The last threat came in 2018. I was going to court to submit some documents when Mintu called me to tell me that this is not going to turn out well for me," recalled Rocky.

In addition to the threats, the legal process itself was tiresome. "I had to show up before court around 450 times [in connection to the case]. There were so many instances when we came to court and then the hearing was postponed for some reason. We felt frustrated. During the early stages, we had to fight just to have our case get accepted," he said.

He finally succeeded in filing a case on August 8, 2014, six months after his brother was killed, with the Metropolitan Sessions Judges Court of Dhaka.

On February 17, 2015, Dhaka Metropolitan Magistrate SM Ashikur Rahman conducted a judicial enquiry, found involvement of Jahid and the four others, and submitted a report to the court.

The court framed charges against the five on April 17, 2016.

Meanwhile, the defendant's lawyer Faruque Ahmed continued to reject the fact that Jonny was killed in police custody. "He died of a heart attack according to medical records. It was a wedding programme with a lot of loud music ... loud music can induce heart attacks," he attempted to justify.

He also alleged that Jahid's self-defence statement was taken upon torture. When asked about the many forms of harassment the complainants had faced, he rejected them all. "These are all vague accusations that the complainant brought to gain traction with the media," he said.

He further stated, "The law [Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, 2013] is not suitable in the context of Bangladesh. It was formulated only to appease international actors. The law will stop the police from doing their jobs."

Vaccine safety top priority

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the game. For drugs and vaccines which are given to people, you have to test their safety, first and foremost," she said.

WHO officials did not immediately respond directly to questions from Reuters over the move by AstraZeneca to pause global trials, including large late-stage trials, of its experimental coronavirus vaccine due to an unexplained illness in a study participant.

The vaccine, which AstraZeneca is developing with the University of Oxford, has previously been described by the WHO as probably the world's leading candidate and the most advanced in terms of development.

AstraZeneca said it voluntarily paused trials to allow an independent committee to review safety data.

US infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci said yesterday that AstraZeneca's decision to pause global trials was unfortunate but not an uncommon safety precaution in a vaccine development process.

Fauci hoped the company could proceed with its trial.

The WHO is in the midst of rounding up support for a global coalition, called the ACT Accelerator, in the hope of fairly distributing vaccines, treatments and diagnostics for the new coronavirus to rich and poor countries alike.

In addition to 92 lower-income

countries seeking aid, some 79 wealthier countries have expressed interest, with a September 18 deadline for binding commitments.

But some countries that have struck their own vaccine deals, including the United States which is not joining the WHO effort.

The vaccine pillar of ACT, called COVAX, hopes to secure enough vaccine to deliver 2 billion doses by the end of 2021, though concrete fund raising has, so far, lagged goals. Volume buying and possible tiered pricing offered by some manufacturers could help make a vaccine more affordable, Swaminathan said.

"You need to come together. Essentially, if every country and every organisation tries to do this on their own, it's going to be long and hard and difficult," she said. "This is the first time that the world will need vaccines in the billions of doses."

SAFETY PLEDGE Meanwhile, the CEOs of nine companies developing vaccines against Covid-19 on Tuesday pledged to "uphold the integrity of the scientific process" amid concern Donald Trump will pressure regulators to approve a vaccine ahead of the presidential election in November.

"We, the undersigned biopharmaceutical companies, want to make clear our ongoing commitment to developing and testing potential

vaccines for Covid-19 in accordance with high ethical standards and sound scientific principles," said the CEOs.

The statement was signed by AstraZeneca, BioNTech, GlaxoSmithKline, Johnson & Johnson, Merck, Moderna, Novavax, Pfizer and Sanofi.

Specifically, the companies said they would only seek emergency authorisations for vaccines "after demonstrating safety and efficacy through a Phase 3 clinical study that is designed and conducted to meet requirements of expert regulatory authorities such as FDA," the Food and Drug Administration.

Some experts and former officials of this agency worry it has become politicised after it issued emergency use authorisations for two Covid-19 treatments without sufficient proof, reports AFP.

Both hydroxychloroquine, whose authorisation was later revoked over safety fears, and blood plasma from recovered Covid-19 patients, were touted by Trump.

Joe Biden, the Democratic candidate for president, has accused Trump of "undermining public confidence" by regularly raising the possibility a vaccine will be ready ahead of the election on November 3.

Stephen Hahn, the head of the FDA, has also guaranteed that only science will decide when a vaccine is ready.

The culprits must be punished

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"I can tell you all that the culprits responsible for the attack will definitely be punished and I am ensuring it. Some people have already been arrested in this regard and an investigation is underway to find out the real cause and masterminds behind it. There is no lapse in the probe and it will not happen," the PM told parliament.

She was replying to a supplementary question from BNP lawmaker Harunur Rashid from Chapainawabganj-3.

The opposition MP requested the premier to form a high-powered investigation team like it was done over the killing of Feni madrasa student Nusrat Jahan Rafi to probe the attack on the UNO as he expressed doubts whether the local investigators in Dinajpur would be able to conduct the probe properly.

In reply, Hasina said, "In my eyes, criminals are criminals. I will never consider which [political] party they belong to. I will not spare those even if they are from my party -- this is my policy and I'm moving ahead with this principle. You have already realised it."

Terminating the attack on UNO Wahida in Dinajpur unfortunate, the Leader of the House said some people have already been arrested in connection with the incident and more arrests would be made following the investigation.

"Many have speculated that it as an incident of theft. An investigation is underway in a proper manner to find out everything in connection with the incident."

Hasina asked the lawmakers not to protect criminals. "People who are committing crimes and those

protecting the criminals are equally liable."

She said the government had flown UNO Wahida to Dhaka by a helicopter after the incident and took all possible measures to ensure her proper treatment.

Wahida and her father Omar Ali were seriously injured in an attack by criminals at her official residence on the Ghoraghat Upazila Parishad premises on the night of September 2.

She is now undergoing treatment at the capital's National Institute of Neurosciences and Hospital.

Law enforcement agencies have so far arrested Asadul Haque, the prime accused in a case filed in connection with the attack, and his two aides Nabiul Islam and Santu Kumar Biswas from different upazilas in Dinajpur on Friday.

The three were placed on seven-day remand each by a Dinajpur court for interrogation.

MORNINGS IN PM'S DAILY LIFE

Yesterday in parliament, Jatiya Party MP Fakhru Imam wanted to know what the premier looks for first after waking up from bed in the morning.

Hasina in reply said she starts her day with offering prayers and reciting the holy Quran.

"After waking up, I first look for a Jainamaj [prayer mat]. Then I recite the holy Quran. I myself make a cup of tea or coffee. If my younger sister or my daughter Putul is at home, the person who wakes up first makes the tea or coffee," the PM said, adding that she then starts reading books.

During the Covid-19 period, she takes a morning walk and sits on the bank of the Gono Bhaban Lake with a fishing rod to catch fish, Hasina said.

This will encourage

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"Hopefully, the victims of police torture will now come forward to file cases under this act," he said.

Noted rights activist Nur Khan Liton said, "We have to express satisfaction as, though delayed, we have got a judgement in which accused are convicted under the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act."

He said the government has to create an environment in which, if anyone falls victim to such torture, they can easily and fearlessly file cases against the accused. The government will also have to ensure that witnesses can give their depositions without fear.

Through this judgement the offenders will get a message that if anyone commits such crimes they will be brought to book.

But offenders will only get the message when aggrieved people are able to file cases without fear. "So far, no such environment is visible," he added.

"Whatever law we have, we will not be able to reach the expected target if we cannot create a society where people will file cases without fear. Yesterday's verdict is a progress towards the goal."

Supreme Court lawyer Jyotirmoy Barua said, "We have long been speaking in support of this law.

Whatever weakness there is in the 2013 act, it contains legal provisions that has brought or may bring groundbreaking changes in the protection of people.

"Our key challenge is that the police who are torturing me and shooting me to death are given the task of investigating. Such investigation loses credibility."

But under the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, judicial inquiry is kept as a provision.

"Amid such an adverse circumstance where even a person like Maj (ret'd) Sinha can be shot dead... such a verdict is at least one step forward."

"I don't want to say everything will change overnight due to the judgment," he added.

He however said the verdict means if anyone approaches the court with such a complaint, there is a chance of getting justice. "This verdict will send a positive message to people," he added.

Advocate Salma Ali who was in the courtroom as the verdict was being read out, said afterwards, "In a country like ours, where there is no witness protection, filing a case against law enforcers and then winning it is a momentous step. The family was under threat many times. This judgment gives the message that there is no impunity for anyone."

Lupa, a woman of many avatars

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of her posing with leaders of the ruling party have been doing the rounds on social media.

Investigators say she abducted Zinia after offering her money. They are looking into whether Lupa has links with any trafficking racket.

Police on Sunday night rescued Zinia from Narayanganj and arrested Lupa in Amtola area of the city's Fatullah. Lupa is now on a two-day remand in an abduction case filed with Shahbagh Police Station.

Mishu Biswas, additional deputy commissioner at Ramna Division of police, told The Daily Star that Lupa has a criminal record. "She was once accused in a triple-murder case. Besides, there were allegations of fraudulence against her."

Zinia, who used to sell flowers in Dhaka University's TSC area, was abducted on September 1.

Zinia lives with her mother and two siblings in TSC area. After she went missing, her mother Senura Begum told reporters that she last saw her daughter talking to two women near Suhrawardy Udyan.

Lupa's Facebook profile mentions that she is the managing director of Agnee TV, the general secretary of Bangladesh Awami Peshajibi League, and former student affairs secretary of Bangladesh Chhatra League.

She also used to claim to people that she was a senior crime reporter at different newspapers, online portals and TV channels, and a member of Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists and Dhaka Union of Journalists.

On her Facebook page, she is seen receiving the Cyclone Preparation Programme (CPP) Award 2019 from the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief.

Many on social media criticised her apparent connection with the ruling party and the journalists' associations.

Police said Lupa has yet to prove what she said about her profession was true.

ADC Mishu Biswas said, "She claimed to be a member of the press

club, but could not provide any proof. She just gave us a business card of Mohona TV where she claims to have worked once. She could provide nothing else."

Lupa told officers that she is a former BCL leader and now works for the ruling party's unit for professionals, Mishu told The Daily Star.

About the abduction, Lupa told officers that she felt sympathetic towards Zinia and took her home. However, police said the actual motive might be different.

Mahbub Alam, joint commissioner of Detective Branch of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, told The Daily Star that officers are looking into whether she has links to child traffickers.

Lupa's Facebook page, where she posted her photos with ruling party leaders and ministers and her poems, has over 10,000 followers.

SINHA MURDER CASE

Court records confessional statements of four accused

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

Four accused in the Maj (ret'd) Sinha murder case gave confessional statements before a Cox's Bazar court yesterday following the end of their second-phase remand of four days.

They were produced before the court of Senior Judicial Magistrate Tamanna Farah around 11:00am, said Senior ASP Khairul Islam, who works at Rab and is also the investigation officer of the case.

The four accused are ASI Liton Mia and three constables -- Safanur Karim, Kamal Hosen and Abdullah Al Mamun.

Earlier, they were taken to Cox's Bazar Sadar Hospital around 10:00am for health check-up from Rab custody, said Shaheen Md Abdur Rahman, resident doctor of the hospital.