BANGLADESH UPDATE 1,666 New cases in 24hrs | 3,53,844 Total cases | 5,044 Deaths | 2,62,953 Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE 977,350 Deaths | 31,887,547 Total cases

COVID-19, CLIMATE CHANGE

PM for concerted global action to combat them

Bss, *Dhaka*

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has called for a "concerted global action" to effectively address the crisis arising out of the climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic.

"Our climate emergency and Covid-19 are global threats. Both were predictable, and we could have -- should have -- done much more to minimize the risks. But now that they are upon us, the best way to respond, surely, is through concerted international action," she said.

Hasina, also the chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum, made the call in an article published in leading British daily The Guardian on Tuesday.

Following is the article:

One-third of my country was underwater last month. The heaviest rains in almost a decade began and have still not abated. More than 1.5 million Bangladeshis are displaced; tens of thousands of hectares of paddy fields have been washed away. Millions of my compatriots will need food aid this year.

Calamities, alas, never strike alone. The floods, which come in the wake of widespread destruction caused by Cyclone Amphan in May, are making it more difficult to contain the coronavirus. More than 2.4 million people had already been moved from the destructive path of the storm without delivering them into the even greater danger of Covid-19.

Yet while the infection and death rates have been contained, concerns remain until a foolproof safeguard is acquired. Economic lockdowns have hit our textile industry and exports and forced hundreds of thousands of our international migrant workers to return home, with the vast majority remaining unemployed.

Like many other climate-vulnerable nations across the globe, Bangladesh is trying to save lives, shore up healthcare systems, and cushion the economic shock for millions of people, all while avoiding fiscal collapse.

But this is not a cry for help; it is a warning. For while other countries may be less exposed to the climate crisis, they will not be able to escape its destructive force for long. Countries more fortunate than mine should take a long, hard look at what we are battling. Recent research suggests rising sea levels will force hundreds of millions of people to abandon low-lying coastal cities worldwide by mid-century. Will the global community act in time to avert this catastrophe?

Both the climate crisis and the pandemic are complex problems with many ramifications. They will either be solved collectively, or not at all. It will be futile to spend hundreds of billions of dollars to secure a Covid-19 vaccine for one nation alone, if the pandemic is allowed to rage elsewhere.

And it will be similarly pointless for a majority of nations to rein in their emissions and build more sustainable economies if the world's largest emitters do not do the same.

The G20 countries are responsible for about 80% of total global emissions, while the bottom 100 countries only account for 3.5%. The world cannot successfully tackle the climate challenge without significant action from everyone.

The 2015 Paris Agreement is still our best chance to contain global warming and limit its most pernicious effects.

To date, 189 countries have ratified a treaty that commits them to collectively cut emissions to stop global temperatures from rising by more than 2C above pre-industrial levels, and to try to limit the rise to 1.5C if possible.

That last, more ambitious goal was proposed by the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), which I chair -- a group of 48 countries disproportionately affected by a warming planet, Bangladesh among them.

CVF nations have been at the forefront of climate adaptation as well as climate change, promoting initiatives such as building stronger shelters against cyclones and replanting mangrove forests to protect coastal communities from sea surges.

In acknowledgment of this important work, the Global Center on Adaptation will open an office in Dhaka this month to extend these best practices across South Asia.

The world's poorest, most vulnerable countries to climate change have kept our side of the bargain.

According to the Sustainable Development Report 2020, 43 countries in Africa and many more across Asia and Latin America have achieved our climate action goals. The rich world has not.

International funding for climate adaptation is still far short of what is needed. Furthermore, new, more ambitious climate initiatives are unlikely to succeed without greater leadership and world-class technology and pioneering climate research that have delivered so many ground-breaking solutions to date.

If we don't increase our ambition, we will all lose out. As many countries and companies can attest, finding low-carbon solutions and minimizing climate risks are the best ways of building more resilient, more efficient and more competitive economies.

We all benefit from thriving trading partners in a low-carbon resilient world. Surely no one is in favor of the alternative -- a fractured global order in which even rich countries are impoverished by the destructive force of global warming.

PM calls for strong global partnership

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digital services and also exposed the stark digital divide.

"Around half of the world's population does not have access to basic internet. We must close this gap," she said.

Hasina said the Bangladesh government has envisioned a "Digital Bangladesh" by 2021, and the country witnessed a boom in the internet due to its push for digitalisation.

"The total number of internet users stood at 103.48 million. Our digitaliastion has afforded our people huge opportunities to become changemakers," she said.

The premier said the government's focus on digital connectivity has facilitated economic development and catalysed social changes, including women's empowerment. "It's helping SDGs implementation and fighting against Covid-19."

"As we set to transform Bangladesh into an advanced economy by 2041, we wish to place our younger generation at the centre of this transformative journey," she added.

The premier pledged to set up digital academies and centres of excellence in every secondary school of the country by 2030 considering emerging job markets led by the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Paul Kagame, president of Rwanda, Chua Sock Koong, CEO of Singtel, Tim Berners Lee, founder of WWW, and Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University were present at the event as panelists.

Hasina joined the event at the invitation of Henrietta Fore, executive director of United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), and Houlin Zhao, secretary general of International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

Ministers to get more for travel

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the salaries of MPs by 30 percent for one year to help supplement the financial resources necessary to tackle the pandemic.

Similarly, Bangladesh should reprioritise the resource reallocation and fiscal-monetary policies to meet the exigencies arising out of the pandemic, said the experts.

Dr Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh, said, "At a time when the country is facing what the prime minister called a national crisis and when the government is starved of revenue to confront the multitude of challenges due to the pandemic, such increase of travel allowances is improper both on financial and ethical grounds."

Allowances for travels cannot be treated as a source of income, he told The Daily Star.

"Publicly exposed persons in situations like this should lead by example by forgoing travel allowances which most of them can definitely afford, or for a maximum get reimbursed on actual basis, that too only if such travels are indispensable."

He further said public representatives and ministers are expected to be mindful that their salaries and benefits are paid by the taxpayers, and there couldn't be a worse timing to add such avoidable burdens.

THE LETTER

The letter said the allocated money cannot be used for any other purpose other than travel. If money is required outside the allocation, it should be proposed and sent to the Cabinet Division.

Moreover, ministries and divisions will inform the Cabinet Division about travel expenses every three months.

Officials say usually the travel expenses of the ministers are borne by the government but they often travel abroad by invitations. In those cases, the host organisation bears the costs.

Contacted, Cabinet Secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam asked this correspondent to talk to the desk concerned and the person who signed the letter.

The signatory, Syedur Rahman, said, "I cannot say anything about this. I probably signed it as a leave substitute. The officer of the desk concerned can tell you about the issue."

Contacted, an official of the ministerial service branch of the Cabinet Division, said the budget allocation was prepared in March and at that time it was not possible to forecast the gravity of the pandemic.

"There was no scope for forecasting. When the budget will be revised in January, there will be scope for returning the money if it is unspent," said the official last week, requesting not to be named.

Adolescent boys tightrope-walking on a high voltage wire before they dive into the Dhaleswari river in Ford Nagar area of Singair, Manikganj. The frolicking might end in an irreversible tragedy any moment. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: **PALASH KHAN**

Gifts, trips secure contracts

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Some bidders unlawfully obtained information on the official cost estimates of bidding process, which are strictly confidential, giving rise to the possibility of corruption, it said.

The WB said it did not find any statistics on the number of government officials prosecuted for receiving gifts or other favours from bidders.

In fiscal 2019-20, government purchase was estimated around $24.1 billion, which was 45.2 percent of the annual budget and 8 percent of the GDP.

Most of the purchases were done through the e-GP since its introduction in 2011. The government introduced the online system aiming at eliminating corruption and malpractices previously attributed to the traditional paper-based lengthy procurement system. Despite the introduction of the e-GP, the public procurement process is yet to achieve the expected level of transparency.

According to the WB assessment, 80 percent of government procurement was made through open competitive method (OTM) that uses a price cap of 10 percent of the estimated cost, meaning a bid above or below the cap would be rendered null and void.

This makes the bidding process less competitive, it said.

The report noted that the number of competing contractors decreased in the open tender process. On average, 4.2 contractors used to compete in open tender in the past but the number has come down to two. On the other hand, the participation of only one contractor in single tenders increased to 50 percent from 20 percent.

BIG CONTRACTORS' MONOPOLY

The WB report said big contractors largely dominate the government procurement process with small bidders getting marginalised.

"Large bidders are capturing the procurement market and marginalising small bidders.

"The business share of small bidders (bottom 10 percent) decreased by 40 percent and the business share of large bidders (top 5 percent) increased by 21 percent."

Interviews with bidders revealed most of the new and small business entities did not get the intended advantage of the Limited Tendering Method (LTM) meant for them, as large bidders can also participate in the procurement process.

The global lender also pointed out that though the official cost estimates of bidding process are strictly confidential, a number of bidders unlawfully managed to obtain the confidential documents, giving rise to the possibility of corruption.

It also mentioned that the interviewed bidders claimed, in some cases, such information was collected through unfair means.

The whole process is not consistent with the international good procurement practices, and resulted in failed constructions, delays and cost-overruns, the WB observed.

Talking to The Daily Star, Dr Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh, said the WB observations are consistent with the findings of a recent TIB study on the issue.

"There are ample justifications to conclude that the capacity and scope created by modernisation of public procurement including the e-GP have failed to deliver any reasonable degree of positive outcome in terms of open and fair competition as well as control of the practice of manipulated capture of the lion's share of contacts by vested groups."

Syndicates of unscrupulous bidders continued to secure contracts "in collusion with a section of officials and the politically powerful who control the submission of proposals by eliminating the possibility of fair and open competition", he mentioned.

"Since the devil lies in the hands of the politically powerful with direct or indirect linkages with the ruling party, the angel is to be found in the removal of political influence over public procurement."

This can be achieved by banning any form of direct or indirect business relations of public representatives and politically exposed persons and their families with the state, added the TIB executive director.

"CHANGE OF MINDSET NECESSARY"

Asked about malpractices in public procurement, Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal said, "If we are dishonest and share advance information regarding the bidding process and estimated costs, amendments to laws will not be enough to stop such dishonesty."

"We all need to change our mindset," he noted.

Seeking anonymity, a high official of the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) under the planning ministry said they are trying to introduce electronic contract management (e-CMS) system to curb malpractices.

"We are piloting e-CMS for three LGED and two Roads and Highways procurement contracts. If it proves to be successful, we will be able to check malpractices," claimed the official.

The official further said they are also working to bring changes to the public procurement act and rules. Those include removal of 10-percent cap in the open tendering method.

WB RECOMMENDATIONS

In its report, the WB put forward a set of recommendations to improve the situation. These include removal of 10-percent cap from the open tendering method and alternative solutions to tackle the issue of abnormally low number of bids.

It also suggested getting rid of the lottery system and 5-percent (plus/minus) cap in limited tendering and making an assessment on how the tendering method could be used to give preferential treatment to small and medium bidders, women-led enterprises and start-ups.

About delayed implementation of contracts, the WB proposed rolling out the newly developed e-CMS module of the e-GP and monitoring contract management performance and also scaling up citizen monitoring of contract implementation.

It said the capacity of the Central Procurement Technical Unit (CPTU) remains restrained due to its legal structure, lack of autonomy in decision making, and limited staffing.

The WB also stressed the need for speeding up the process of conversion of the CPTU to the proposed Bangladesh Public Procurement Authority with enhanced authority and autonomy.

Hope rekindled for Saudi returnees

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consecutive day yesterday demanding air tickets to Saudi Arabia.

Agitated expatriate workers also surrounded the expatriate welfare ministry at Eskaton around 11:00am yesterday.

Around 1:00pm, a six-member delegation of Saudi returnees called on the Overseas Employment Minister Imran Ahmad. The meeting lasted half an hour and the minister sought time till Monday to resolve the crisis.

FLIGHTS AND TICKETS

Saudia resumed regular flights to and from Dhaka yesterday. The first flight carried around 255 Bangladeshis to Saudi Arabia. But only around 800 more would have been able to go to Saudi Arabia on these twice-a-week flights by September 30, said officials of the Saudi Arabian Airlines.

Even with the addition of four weekly Biman flights to the kingdom, question remains on whether all the migrants would be able to return to work before October 17 unless other carriers operate flights or these two airlines run more.

The Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) initially gave Saudia permission to operate two weekly flights from Dhaka although the carrier sought seven.

CAAB Chairman Air-Vice Marshal M Mafidur Rahman on Tuesday assured that they would give permission to Saudia to operate as many flights as it wanted.

Biman is going to operate Dhaka-Jeddah flight on September 26 and Dhaka-Riyadh flight on September 27 for the return ticket holders of March 16 and 17.

Passengers with return tickets of March 16 and 17 were requested to contact the Biman Sales Office for booking tomorrow with necessary documents, including tickets, passports, approval from apps/links specified in Saudi Arabia, said Biman Managing Director and CEO Mokabbir Hossain in a message.

Other passengers will also be notified for booking in phases and when more flights are approved by the Saudi authorities, he said.

He said Covid-19 negative certificate was mandatory and all passengers would have to reach the kingdom within 48 hours of their test sample taken.

"All passengers will have to conduct the Covid-19 test in Dhaka and will have to travel from Dhaka," said the Biman MD.

Sources at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport and the expatriates' welfare ministry said around 35,000 migrants returned to the country from the kingdom on holiday since late February but could not go back due to the pandemic and subsequent suspension of flights in March.

Before this visa and work permit validity extension, the Saudi government had thrice extended the validity of work permits for Bangladesh citizens stuck at home. The last of three was to expire on September 30.

Home to more than 22 lakh Bangladeshis, Saudi Arabia is also the prime destination of Bangladeshi migrant workers and the biggest remittance-generating country for Bangladesh.

Earlier yesterday, Momen urged the Bangladeshi migrants to have patience.

"We all are working together. We're working very sincerely to resolve the problem. Having patience is very important," he told reporters at his office after an inter-ministerial meeting.

He said the government had requested the Saudi government to extend validity of visas and work permits by three months.

"We just made the request yesterday [Tuesday]," Momen said.

Govt ready to tackle second wave of Covid

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meeting, the PM instructed the authorities to take precautions for dealing with different cold-related diseases as the winter is set to arrive at the end of October or mid-November.

"She especially gave instructions to take precautions in case the country witnesses a second wave of Covid-19 transmission," said Cabinet Secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam while briefing reporters at the secretariat after the meeting.

Echoing the PM, the health minister claimed that the health sector showed competency in handling the coronavirus outbreak.

"Bangladesh has maintained a notable position considering the death rate in terms of total number of infected people. The health sector is also prepared to tackle in this way even if the second wave begins," the minister said during the inauguration of 23 development works at DMCH marking the birth centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

He said, "The risk of corona [Covid-19 outbreak] is increasing in many countries. Many people in our country are not maintaining health rules. But we have to stay aware."

Asked about further lockdowns, the minister said, "There is no decision yet in this regard."

The government is taking steps against corruption in the health sector, he said.

Speaking at the event as the special guest, Prof Dr ABM Khurshid Alam, director general of the health directorate, recalled the sacrifice of the healthcare professionals to fight Covid-19.

Presided over by outgoing DMCH director Brig Gen AKM Nasiruddin, Mohibur Rahman, additional secretary of the ministry's health services division, and newly appointed DMCH Director Col Nazmul Haque, among others, spoke at the event.

DAILY UPDATE

The death toll from Covid-19 increased as the Directorate General of Health Services reported 37 deaths in 24 hours till 8:30am yesterday.

The total number of deaths has reached 5,044 and the death rate stands at 1.43 percent.

Some 1,666 new infections were recorded during the period, taking the number of infected people to 3,52,287, said a press release of DGHS.

The current positivity rate is 11.77 percent, while the total positivity rate stands at 18.91 percent.

Bangladesh is now 15th in the list of worst-affected countries in the world in terms of the number of confirmed cases.

The position is one step ahead of Saudi Arabia and one step behind the United Kingdom, according to worldometers.info.

Meanwhile, 2,163 Covid-19 patients recovered in the last 24 hours.

The total number of recoveries is 2,62,953, and the recovery rate 74.64 percent.

British Council

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Secondary and Higher Education Division Additional Secretary Mominur Rashid Amin said they gave the approval yesterday and it was a preliminary nod.

"The government can take back the approval if the situation surrounding Covid-19 transmission worsens, or for any other reason," he said, adding that there would have to be strict adherence to health protocols, including maintaining six feet of distance between examinees at all times.

In the upcoming October-November 2020 exams, the UK exam boards will base results on students' performance in the exams alone and not on any non-exam assessment, with the exception of art and design qualifications, the statement added.

This will be a departure from the May-June session, when educational boards globally decided not to stage exams due to the coronavirus pandemic, instead preparing results based on predicted grades and previous academic records submitted by schoolteachers. That is what protesting students wanted for the November-October session too.

It said all British Council activities will be carried out in line with the government of Bangladesh Covid-19 protocols, as well as prevention and control mechanisms outlined by World Health Organisation (WHO).

"Our safeguarding protocols, including mandatory face coverings in exams, physical distancing of candidates, cleaning and sanitisation of the venues, will be applied in all exam venues across Dhaka, Chattogram, Sylhet, Narayanganj, and Khulna," said the statement.

Two UK boards, Cambridge Assessment International Education (CAIE) and Pearson's Edexcel, arrange O and A Level exams internationally. British Council Bangladesh administers the exams in the country.

English-medium students can sit for these exams either through schools or as private candidates.

Approximately 5,200 students in Bangladesh have registered for the upcoming October-November session of exams, according to British Council.

A-level exams under Cambridge are scheduled to start from October 1, and those under Pearson from October 5 . Pearson's O-level exams are set to start from November 2 and Cambridge's from November 5.

Meanwhile, a group of English medium students yesterday sought Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's intervention for cancellation of the upcoming O and A level exams during a press conference held in the capital yesterday .

The students urged the authorities concerned not to hold the October-November exam session amid the coronavirus pandemic, as it would put students and their families at severe health risk.

They also demanded grades based on their previous results, a process known as "predicted grades".

"We want the prime minister and education minister's intervention for cancellation of exams during the coronavirus crisis," Chowdhury Shamsuzzaman, an A-Level candidate, said at the press conference.

He said the current state of affairs is not suitable for exams and that it would be tough for examinees to wear masks during an exam as it would increase the stress of an already stressful situation.

When the exams take place Bangladesh could be seeing the second wave of coronavirus transmission, students said.

Moreover, newly introduced online education was insufficient to prepare for a board exam, Shamsuzzaman added.

In light of all this, the students demanded the cancellation of the October-November exam session in Bangladesh, and asked for predicted grading instead, as they don't want a gap in their education.

Students have continued their protests online. They also formed a human chain in front of the National Press Club on Sunday and Tuesday, reiterating their demands.

Europe grapples

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President Emmanuel Macron had said new curbs would be announced soon and sources said they could include a ban on alcohol sales after 8:00 pm and restrictions on social gatherings, as well as speeded up testing.

"We are calling on people to be vigilant, we will have to live with this virus for a while," said Anne Souyris, deputy Paris mayor. "The object is to protect yourself while shaping a social life."

The Madrid region, the heart of an explosion of infections in Spain, has already locked down roughly 850,000 people and plans to extend the measures on Friday.

Britain has already announced fresh steps to try to allay the rising toll.

"To help contain the virus, office workers who can work effectively from home should do so," the government said on Tuesday, despite fears of a devastating economic impact.

New rules come into force for pubs and other hospitality venues today, forcing them to close early, and plans to allow fans back into sporting events have been ditched.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned the new restrictions could last up to six months and called for a collective effort to "get through this winter together".

His scientific advisors had said the United Kingdom could see a devastating 50,000 coronavirus cases a day by mid-October if no action is taken.