

**BANGLADESH
UPDATE**



1,125
New cases in 24hrs



3,68,690
Total cases



5,348
Deaths



2,81,656
Recoveries

**GLOBAL
UPDATE**



1,039,349
Deaths



35,232,157
Total cases

A disaster called Titas

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A SAGA OF NEGLIGENCE
Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Limited has 13,138km underground pipeline, 624km transmission and 12,514km distribution or service lines, in its network that covers Dhaka, Narayanganj, and Gazipur.

It has around 28.66 lakh domestic and industrial consumers.

Of the total service line, 7,001.40km was constructed by the end of the year 2000, according to official documents of Titas. Its longest service line is around 6,000km, which is in Dhaka.

Titas officials said around one third of the total gas pipeline, installed 25-40 years ago, has become rusty and risky. The problem is mostly with the distribution line.

The company has a dedicated section called System Operation Department for maintenance. But it mainly depends on consumer's complaint in the absence of a mechanism or device to identify the leaks without seeing it physically.

For lodging complaints, it has a call centre which receives on an average 375 emergency and 50 normal calls a month, according to an official.

Surprisingly, Titas does not have the detailed service line map and central database for replaced pipelines.

"We don't have the exact data on leaks in gas distribution lines right now," Titas Managing Director Ali Md Al-Mamun told The Daily Star.

However, a survey conducted by Titas three years ago found 35,000 out of its 5.65 lakh gas risers leaky.

Risers are used to bring buried natural gas piping above the ground to allow access to the gas flowing through the pipes.

A Titas official concerned said there was no data on risers being fixed so far.

The poor condition of the gas transmission and distribution infrastructure was highlighted in the Power Sector Masterplan (PSMP)-2016, prepared by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA).

As a short-term goal, the PSMP-2016 recommended that transmission and distribution should be electronically mapped to introduce advanced monitoring and control systems to support efficient use of gas by 2019.

On the gas leak incidents, it said most of the incidents presumably are caused by poor maintenance, use of low-grade materials, and/or poor construction practice.

"More attention should be given to gas leaks and system loss from gas transmission and distribution infrastructure to prevent economic loss, i.e. the lost opportunity cost," it added.

Four years have gone by since the PSMP-2016 came up with the recommendations but nothing has changed in the field of operations and maintenance, said energy experts.

The government mainly focused on power generation using expensive fossil fuel, they said, adding that due to poor maintenance and operation, gas-related fire incidents are taking place frequently, leading to casualties.

According to the Fire Service and Civil Defence Directorate, there were 24,074 fires last year.

"We found 19 percent accidents were gas-related, gas leakages to be precise," said Brigadier General Md Sazzad Hussain, director general of the directorate.

Titas claimed 208 fires in 2018-2019 in its distribution areas gas-related.

'AN ENEMY OF THE MASSES'
Prof Badrul Imam of Dhaka University pointed to two factors: use of poor-quality raw materials in illegal connections and no effort to replace the old pipelines.

Terming the network of illegal gas lines nothing but a time bomb, he said it is the creation of Titas officials who are "more interested in corruption than providing service".

"They are not accountable. The illegal network of gas pipelines is their creation. Unless Titas stops their illegal activities, accidents will continue to happen."

Prof Badrul suggested that the government makes alternative fuels like LPG cheaper, even if it requires subsidy, to shed the burden on pipeline gas.

On the graft among Titas officials, Prof M Shamsul Alam, energy adviser to Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB), said, "People are suffering just due to the greed of those corrupt officials. Titas has turned into an enemy of the masses."

"We have to bribe them to fix the leakages and pay extra charge due to the rise in gas price. They are providing poor quality gas but feasting on illegal networks."

He claimed there are 70,000 points in Dhaka city where gas leaks due to poor maintenance and illegal connections.

M Tamim, a teacher of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, thinks the main problem of Titas is in its management.

"Illegal gas connections, gas line leakage, corruption -- all are interrelated. If there is corruption, there will be illegal connections," said Tamim, also a former adviser to a caretaker government.

SHIFTING BLAME

Titas Managing Director Ali Md Al-Mamun blamed other service providers, including city corporations and Wasa, for damaging and cracking its pipes during their development activities.

"In most cases, when other service providers work, they unintentionally make some leaks," he said.

"I have already issued instruction to identify all the gas-leaking points and repair those within a month."

Rana Akbar Haidary, director operation of Titas, said, "A number of development work like metro rail is going on in the Titas gas transmission area, causing a good number of leaks. But some leaks happened automatically."

State Minister for Power, Energy and Mineral Resources Nasrul Hamid said most of the Dhaka city lines are old and need to be replaced.

There are around 700km of illegal gas pipelines across the country, he said without elaborating further.

"Of course, Titas has responsibility and they will be punished for any negligence on their part. But Titas also cannot do everything. What about the other service providers? We all have to work together," he said.

The minister said the government has taken up a Tk 1,200 crore project for replacing the old pipelines to streamline the gas distribution system.

Under the project, the gas transmission and distribution system will come under Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) system.

Once the SACDA system is introduced, information of a leak in a gas line or an illegal connection at any place will immediately go to the central control room, said Nasrul.

China ready to improve

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always respected each other and treated each other as equals, enhanced political mutual trust and deepened mutually beneficial cooperation that brings tangible benefits to the two peoples, he noted.

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, China and Bangladesh have stuck together through thick and thin, helped each other and fought against the pandemic side by side, writing a new chapter of bilateral friendship, the Chinese president added.

This year, China has also offered zero-tariff treatment to 97 percent of Bangladesh's exports by adding 5,161 more items to the existing list of 3,095 duty-free products.

With some \$26 billion Chinese investments and \$38 billion funding commitments, Bangladesh is one of the largest recipients of China's massive infrastructure project.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), President Xi's top priority initiative, aims firm up China's global influence through rail, maritime and road links from Asia to Europe and Africa in a revival of ancient Silk Road trading routes.

Bangladesh has joined BRI, saying it is ready to be part of any initiative that is aimed at promoting economy, connectivity, peace and sustainability.

India, which has yet to join it, and its ally US, however, are critical of the initiative. They said Chinese financing of projects lead to debt-trap of the

recipients. Dhaka maintains that it is careful and makes sure that the country does not fall into debt trap.

For his part, President Hamid in the message said the Bangladesh-China relationship is developing rapidly and has covered cooperation in key areas, to which Bangladesh attaches great importance.

He expressed his deep appreciation for China's continuous support for Bangladesh in its socio-economic development progress, adding that he believes the close and friendly relationship between the two countries will continue to deepen in the future.

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang also exchanged congratulatory messages with his Bangladesh counterpart Sheikh Hasina.

In his message, Li said China is willing to deepen practical cooperation with Bangladesh in various fields and promote the steady and sustainable development of the China-Bangladesh strategic partnership of cooperation to better benefit the two countries and their people.

For her part, Hasina said the strategic partnership of cooperation between Bangladesh and China has been developed from the two countries' time-tested friendship and cooperation.

The strengthened Bangladesh-China cooperation has unleashed enormous potential in maintaining peace, security and stability in the region and even around the world, she said.



PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

Motorists driving in the dark on Moghbazar-Mouchak flyover. The streetlights of the flyover have not been lit for a long time, despite the surrounding buildings appearing to have electricity. This photo was taken on Friday.

Plumbing depths of pandemic pain

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"But the water level in the river will start to fall in the dry season. There will be no earning from the boat then. I don't know what I will do then," he said.

The coronavirus outbreak and resulting shutdown of the economy have thrown the lives of many teachers like Kibria and Meherun into disarray. As the country celebrates World Teachers Day today, many teachers of private schools, especially the ones outside Dhaka, are struggling with no financial assistance from the government.

The theme of this year's day is: "Teachers: Leading in crisis, reimagining the future".

In Bangladesh, the teachers of many kindergarten and other primary-level schools and non-MPO (Monthly Pay Order) secondary schools are ill-paid. They provide private tuitions to make ends meet.

The pandemic forced many of the teachers to change their profession and caused some schools to shut. The specific data on it is hard to come by.

Many private schools, mostly

kindergartens, are also undergoing monetary crunch while their teachers are not getting their full salaries.

Mizanur Rahman, secretary general of Bangladesh Kindergarten Association, said an estimated 20 percent of kindergarten teachers have switched to other professions.

There are about 40,000 kindergarten schools in the country with around six lakh teachers, he said.

"Hundreds of teachers are working as labourers at shops, selling seasonal fruits, vegetables, or driving auto-rickshaws and there-wheelers."

Safayet Hossain, general secretary of Bangladesh Kindergarten School and College Oikya Parishad, demanded that the teachers be given financial assistance in the form of soft loans for owners of kindergartens and waiver of utility bills for the hard-hit schools.

If the government doesn't provide any assistance and the Covid-19 crisis lingers on, many of the kindergartens across the country will be closed, according to leaders of the teacher's associations.

Infrastructures of 500 schools have been put on sale, said insiders of the

sector.

Primary and Mass Education State Minister Zakir Hossain said authorities of the kindergartens should contact the Prime Minister's Office to seek financial assistance from the government.

"The PMO handled the incentives. I am not in a position to comment on the issue," he added.

The government in June allocated Tk 46.63 crore as one-time "special grant" for teachers and other staff members of schools and colleges, which have not yet been included in the MPO scheme.

As many as 80,747 non-MPO teachers got Tk 5,000 each and 25,038 non-MPO staff members got Tk 2,500 each.

But Nazrul Islam Rony, president of Bangladesh Teachers' Association, thinks the actual number of affected teachers and institutions is higher.

He said more than two lakh teachers of non-MPO secondary schools and colleges are facing hardships.

He urged the government to provide the support one more time to help the teachers in crisis.

Encroachers dig

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causing it to resemble a water body.

Around 30 trucks lumbered in empty and chugged back sand-laden over the course of the day. One of the truck drivers, pulling the vehicle over at Shah Suja road, said each truckload of sand would be sold for Tk 10,000.

The sand is used at various construction sites, he said, requesting that his name not be used.

Another truck driver told The Daily Star the vehicle's owner pays Tk 500 for each trip to influential locals including Dulhazra Union Parishad Chairman Nurul Amin, his brother Md Monsur and one Bipen Dutta.

They have the backing of Chakaria upazila Chairman Fajlul Karim Saydee.

Nurul Amin told The Daily Star that Paglir Beel was leased out to the upazila chairman and that he had nothing to do with the sand lifting.

Saydee said most quarries in Chakaria were leased out to him as party men make a living by lifting sand.

"I don't know actually what the scenario is on the ground. If there is any damage, I will certainly abide by the action the authorities concerned will take," he said.

Thouhidul Islam, divisional forest

officer (north) of Cox's Bazar under Chattogram Forest Circle, told this correspondent that they had seized and burnt down sand lifting machines last year in the area.

"As I came to know it from you, I am going to take action soon," he said, adding that there is political backing behind the rampant sand lifting.

Abu Naser Md Yeasin Neyaz, divisional forest officer (wildlife and nature conservation), said due to the sand lifting which has caused a large crater in the area, a biodiversity conservation zone for animals is in jeopardy.

99.8pc say they're not Covid-infected

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at their workplaces.

MJF Programme Manager Shoma Datta, shared the findings of the study, conducted between March and June this year, at a virtual meeting jointly organised by the MJF and The Daily Star.

Tanjim Ferdous, a national consultant of the United Nations in Bangladesh, moderated the meeting. While presenting the findings, Shoma said 85.5 percent of the respondents said their factories resumed operations while some 67.44 percent said they feel the threat of job loss.

About sexual harassment amid the pandemic, 31.8 percent of the female workers said they were subjected to sexual harassment at workplaces, while 47.6 percent said the supervisors used abusive language if they failed to meet the target. Only 32.9 percent of the victims lodged complaints and just 7.4 percent got remedy, the study said.

Shaheen Anam, executive director of the MJF, said the study does not give a complete picture of the entire garment sector, rather a part of it. The study was conducted on a limited scale.

"We want the sector to thrive, and at the same time we want improvement in the workers' living standards," she noted.

Addressing the meeting, Planning Minister MA Mannan said the government has rolled out stimulus packages so that the garment sector remains unaffected by the pandemic. "We want to work together with all the stakeholders..."

The minister also mentioned that Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics is conducting a study to know the socio-economic status of people, including the garment workers, amid the pandemic.

At the virtual meeting, Jasmin Shila,

former operator at a garment factory, said she and her family have been going through a tough time since she and her husband lost their jobs.

She contacted some factories for a job but couldn't find any as all the factories had sufficient manpower.

Nazma Akter, executive director of Awaj Foundation, said that when the owners started shutting factories in big numbers in late March, many workers lost jobs.

Later, many of those who still had jobs didn't return to their workplaces though international retailers and brands reinstated a significant number of work orders for local apparel manufacturers, she noted.

Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, said the importance of the garment sector is immense as more than four crore people are directly or indirectly involved in the sector which accounts for 84 percent of the country's annual exports.

Nazneen Ahmed, senior research fellow at Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, suggested creating a database of retrenched workers so that they can be given jobs in factories when normalcy returns in business activities.

About the measures to protect workers from Covid-19, Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue, said those were not adequate to keep the workers safe from virus infections.

George Faller, chief technical adviser of the ILO's RMG Programme, said "Throughout, the ILO has been working with the government of Bangladesh in preparing several Covid-19 guidelines and training on workplace safety and health and labour relations."

Banasree Mitra Neogi, gender adviser to the MJF, said female workers must be protected by applying legal measures at workplaces.

Corrupt judges

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November 27, 1995.

In the judgement, Khandker Musa Khaled, Md Taha Mollah and Farid Uddin Aktar, the then judges of First Court of Settlement of Dhaka, had removed 16 kathas of the land at Kakrail area in Dhaka from the list of abandoned property and given its ownership to four claimants -- KAM Ashraf Uddin (six katha), Lutfunnissa Rahman (four katha), AKM Idris Hossain and his wife Jamila Khatun (six katha) in different plots.

The HC further observed that the then First Court of Settlement of Dhaka led by Musa Khaled had created unprecedented history and handed over the property of the state and people worth thousands of crores of taka to a gang of frauds without any documents or evidence (of claim) and, by doing so, had damaged the dignity of the judiciary.

"When the gang of frauds witness that property of Tk thousands of crores can be claimed without any documents and evidence, it sends a message to them and to the general public that the judiciary is for frauds and the affluent, not for the general public," the verdict said.

It further observed, "The judiciary is the people's last resort of hope and expectations. When the judges do their work through corruption, the general people have no place to go. They get disappointed and angry, and try to find the alternatives. Then they take shelter from unlawful people."

"The rule of law and judicial corruption cannot go hand in hand. If the judicial officers and staffers are corrupt, the rule of law will remain confined only to books..." the HC judges said in the full text of verdict.

They added, "Numerous reports and articles have been published on the independence of the judiciary in our society in many intellectual forums, newspapers and electronic media. But, there is no specific and clear article, on corrupt members of the judiciary."

The HC directed the authorities concerned to send a copy of this verdict to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in order for her to be informed of the matter so that she can take initiatives on a personal level to protect the rule of law and take actions in this regard.

CID to ask for

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The survivors came back to the country on a special flight on September 30. Three other survivors have yet to reach Bangladesh, Zannat said.

"We will talk to the survivors and identify the foreign agents involved in the trafficking chain," she said.

Law enforcers arrested 44 people in 26 cases filed in this regard.

"We have spoken to the families of the 26 who died. The families filed the cases, and they gave us the identities of the local traffickers. Most of them have been arrested."

The nine survivors present there bore the marks of torture and many had freshly healed bullet wounds, and one of them had been permanently disabled.

Janu Miah said, "The incident happened on May 27 around 11:00am. The mafia used to come to our camp and beat us up; this was a daily routine, but that day they tortured us indiscriminately."

"There were around 100 to 150 people from Ghana, Nigeria and Sudan. Around 30-35 of them were women. The Libyan mafia started beating them up, but they retaliated that day and killed a member of the mafia."

The other members of the mafia called for reinforcements, who came and started a shooting at the migrants, he described, "That is how 26 of us died, and 12 of us got injured."

The CID shared with journalists a video footage of the incident obtained from the survivors. The video begins with the image of a body being dragged on a mosaic floor with floral motifs. Men carrying weapons that looked like semi-automatic rifles walked about. The smoke and dust made it difficult to see what was going on. Most of the video was shot in the dark with the only light coming from a parked car.

The person filming walked up to a body possibly of a dark-skinned individual lying in a pool of blood. He then walked up to another body of a lighter-skinned man with close-shorn hair wearing a black and red polo shirt. More bodies came into view, blurry in the smoke.

Throughout the video, people shouted in Arabic. "Stop recording," and "Where is my pistol?" were two of the things said.

Janu Miah said, "One person from the mafia took us to a hospital, but the doctor refused to treat us, saying that there is no chance of survival. The hospital provided an ambulance for another hospital, and they too refused to treat us."

He himself survived two bullet wounds in the stomach.

"Around dawn, they left us on a garbage heap in the desert. We walked around two to three kilometres in that state and found a house of a Sudanese camel-herder. He gave us shelter, and got the locals to call the militia. The militia came, took us away in their vehicles, and got us admitted to Tripoli University Medical College Hospital."

"They didn't treat us until the Bangladeshi embassy officials came. My surgery was done at 1:00am."

The survivors were taken to the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court of Dhaka to give their statements.