

**BANGLADESH
UPDATE**



1,696
New cases in 24hrs



3,94,827
Total cases



5,747
Deaths



3,10,532
Recoveries

**GLOBAL
UPDATE**



1,139,420
Deaths



41,720,837
Total cases

Strike lifted, workers get back

FROM PAGE 1
withdrawal of the work abstention from the president and secretary of Bangladesh Noutan Sramik Federation did not reach them till around 8:30pm last night, the federation's Joint Secretary Nabi Alam, who resides in Chattogram, told The Daily Star.

"We saw on television only the labour minister saying that the workers agreed to withdraw the work abstention," he said.

"Later, we got confirmation from the two top leaders, which we got around 8:30pm," he added.

Bangladesh Noutan Sramik Federation enforced the work abstention since the early hours of October 20, which would continue until their 11-point demand -- including food allowances, sea allowances, appointment letters, identity cards and other benefits -- were met.

Formally, only the food allowance demand was met and negotiated yesterday and the rest will be negotiated, federation President Shah Alam said.

Businesses were apprehensive of serious disruption in the supply chain of commodities and industrial products and further price hike of essentials as daylong meetings with workers and owners' associations, initiated by the government, could not ease the stalemate.

Unloading of import cargo from cargo vessels at the outer anchorage of Chattogram Port and transport of these goods with the help of lighter vessels through inland water routes had been suspended for the last three days.

As of yesterday, 42 bigger-sized cargo vessels with 10 lakh tonnes of import cargo were stranded at the outer anchorage. 40 of those had been anchoring idle for the last three days, while the other two arrived on Wednesday afternoon.

Importers incurred huge amounts of financial losses for the three-day standstill as the demurrage charge for these vessels' idle stay at sea over the last three days stood at around \$1.55 million.

Besides, over 900 lighter vessels loaded with 12 lakh tonnes of such goods were idle at 38 different private docks across the country.

Industry owners said apart from the demurrage charges, there was disruption in transport of imported commodities and raw materials to factories.

Seacom Group Managing Director Mohammed Amirul Haque said such a strike in the midst of a pandemic will seriously hamper the country's economy which is trying hard to recover from the economic fallout of the pandemic.

Two cargo vessels carrying around 75,000 tonnes of cement clinker imported for the group's Premier Cement factories in Dhaka and Chattogram were stuck at the outer anchorage.

Haque said they would have to bear \$12,500 in demurrage charges for the daily overstay of each of these two vessels. He also informed that 50 lighter vessels and oil tankers carrying cement clinkers, edible oil and petroleum for the group also remained idle.

Earlier in the afternoon, State Minister for Shipping Khaled Mahmud Chowdhury was hopeful of solving the issue by yesterday as the officials of BIWTA and Shipping Department sat in meetings with water transport owners and workers.

The state minister told this to journalists after the newly appointed Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Vikram Doraiswami made a courtesy call on the state minister at his ministry office.

Khaled said workers' demand for food allowance is justified.

"Vessel workers had gone on strike earlier and that was solved through discussions. The current issue will also be solved through discussions with both owners and workers."

In the afternoon, Chattogram Port Authority (CPA) Chairman Rear Admiral SM Abul Kalam Azad also sat in a meeting with leaders and stakeholders of the water transport sector.

Run dope tests on drivers

FROM PAGE 1
of Bangladesh Road Transport Authority on the occasion of the National Road Safety Day 2020.

Hasina asked people not to take law into their own hands. She urged people to give up their mentality of assaulting drivers and attacking vehicles over an accident as it invites further accidents in many cases.

She suggested that pedestrians should use zebra crossings. "Everyone must follow traffic rules as those are applicable to all."

The premier asked drivers to give up the mentality of overtaking on roads and highways as it causes accidents in many cases.

Talking about pedestrians, Hasina said there was a serious lack of awareness over traffic rules. "Some pedestrians cross roads just raising their hands in front of running vehicles without considering that it takes time to stop a vehicle even if the driver applies the brake. People will have to be aware about it."

Citing more examples of violation of traffic rules, the PM said the most unfortunate thing is that mothers carrying babies cross roads without using footbridges.

Carrying his baby in his arms, a father was seen crossing a road after scaling the central reservation, she added.

The PM advised people to call 999

police helpline to rescue any victim and take him to a hospital as police services are very good now.

Hasina asked those who are carrying out the road safety movement to conduct a massive campaign in this regard.

She stressed the need for providing training to bus drivers' helpers alongside the drivers, ensuring fitness of vehicles, arranging alternative drivers for long route vehicles and making all aware of traffic rules from their school life.

The premier said the government would construct resting rooms for drivers along all long-distance roads in phases as they need rest.

She said the government has been working to ensure road safety by formulating different plans. The government was improving rural roads so that villagers could enjoy urban facilities staying in villages, she added.

Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader presided over the function, while Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan was connected to it virtually.

Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Road Transport and Bridges Ministry Md Akabbar Hossain, Chairman of Nirapad Sarak Chai Ilias Kandhan and noted columnist Syed Abul Maksud, among others, attended the event.

Gone are the hills

FROM PAGE 1
to a flattened space.

Around 15 to 20 hills existed at Rangapahar, adjacent to Chattogram-Cox's Bazar highway. All of them are gone, he added.

Raseduzzaman Rasel, deputy general manager of Toma Construction, told The Daily Star they would need around eight crore cubic feet of earth in four phases for the rail track construction.

The company has signed a deal with a local named Md Elias, who is supposed to supply earth from Aziz Nagar of Lohagara, he said, adding they don't know exactly where he brings it from.

This correspondent repeatedly called Md Elias and sent him text messages for comment. He neither responded the calls nor responded to the texts.

There was a dumper truck with a nameplate of the railway ministry and Toma at the site of the railway line. Sensing an environment department action, project officials and labourers left, taking away the excavator and trucks, locals said.

In 2016, the railways authorities got the prime minister's approval to cut hills for the construction of the rail track, according to official documents.

The ministry is allowed to raze 33 hills -- 120 acres in total -- at 15 spots of five reserve forests including Chunut, Fasiakhali, Medakocchopiya, Machuyakhali and Napitkhali.

But the hills being flattened at Rangapahar does not fall under government approval as the area is recorded as khas land.

Contacted over the phone, Mofizur Rahman, project director for Dohazari

Cox's Bazar railway line, said they were cutting hills for the rail track as per the government permission. But he has no knowledge about the other hills being razed.

He said the construction firm has hired locals to supply earth and they don't have any control over where the earth comes from.

DOE NEGLIGENCE

Though the hill cutting has been going on there for the last two years, the Chattogram region Department of Environment office did not have any knowledge about it until recently.

They, however, sent a team to the spot for inspection on October 16.

Mohammad Moazzom Hossain, director of DoE Chattogram region, admitted that there was negligence on their part.

"Firstly, it is tough to get news on such hill cutting as the spots are in remote areas. The moment we got the allegation from locals, I sent my team. They inspected and submitted a report. We will take action as per the law," he said on October 18.

He added that they don't have the required manpower to look after all affairs happening in the areas under their jurisdiction.

Afzarul Islam, assistant director of DoE Chattogram region, told The Daily Star that that he has never seen such a massive hill cutting.

"We have found around 2.2 crore cubic feet of hills have been flattened. Locals confirmed that the earth from the hills was being used for the rail track construction."

Afzarul said he submitted the report of damage to higher authorities for further action.



A woman is all smiles as she buys two kgs of potato at the government-set price from a truck of Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) on the capital's Topkhana Road yesterday. As prices of potato and onion have shot up in the markets lately, people gathered in front of such sale points across the city. PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

There's no room for proper politics

FROM PAGE 1
leaders and activists have been accused in those cases.

DS: Is the number of cases you mentioned a political rhetoric or a reality?

Fakhrul: We don't do politics based on falsehood. We have documents. The allegations are political. We have FIR copies. It is beyond imagination that there are 5,000 accused in a single case. There were even instances where there were no incidents, (still) cases were filed. Out of the 5,000 accused, the case document mentioned names of 100-150 and the rest are unknown. The unknowns were filled in with BNP leaders and activists. If anyone digs, everything will be clear. If you want to see, come to our office. We will show you the documents.

DS: Are you facing any case now?

Fakhrul: A total of 86 cases have been filed against me. The High Court stayed 35 cases, but the government is trying to revive those.

DS: The BNP doesn't talk about issues related to public interests like price hike of gas, electricity, and essentials. How do you react to this allegation?

Fakhrul: It's a propaganda which has been going around for a long time and especially after the 2018 national elections. But these are not true. The BNP tried to take to the street, but we were not allowed. Whenever we took to the street, water cannon and truncheons were used by law enforcers to quell us. Our women leaders were harassed. Many party leaders were abducted and killed. Party leaders and activists are in constant fear of abduction and killing, and they cannot stay in their homes.

DS: In the political arena, it is often said that the government in power will not allow the opposition on the street and the opposition cannot wage any movement. Is the BNP acting according to the government's desire?

Fakhrul: It is a propaganda that the BNP does not talk about people's problems. Unfortunately, many joined in to spread this propaganda, which surprised me.

DS: What do you mean by many joined in?

Fakhrul: Some civil society members joined in. When you people write columns, we see this. These are not true. We did not compromise with the government.

DS: You said the BNP did not compromise. On social media, some senior leaders have been saying that you compromised and that's why Khaleda Zia was allowed out.

Fakhrul: It is not true. It is also a propaganda against the BNP. Begum Zia is sick. She came home following

application of her family members. She was not getting treatment in hospital.

DS: The BNP has complained against the Election Commission publicly and repeatedly. But even after that, you are participating in elections. Isn't it contradictory?

Fakhrul: It is not. What is the alternative? The alternative is to resist elections and resort to violence. We don't believe in the politics of violence. We have experienced it many times ... the government resorted to violence and blamed us for it. That's why we tried to maximise the use of the minimum space [we get] in a democratic manner.

DS: College teachers and students cannot post anything anti-government on social media. Have you seen that?

Fakhrul: An authoritarian government is always fearful of losing the power. They don't allow people to speak up. What is the reason behind the directives that college teachers and students cannot express their opinions? The government knows that the college teachers and students are not in its favour.

This is nothing new. The constitution has been amended. There are three clauses against which you cannot say anything. If you say anything that goes against those clauses, seditious case will be filed against you. The Digital Security Act gagged the scope for freedom of expression. You see we are not even creating a buzz against it. If college students are barred from freedom of expression, it is a dreadful matter.

DS: There was a time when the BNP was very vocal against India. After a pause for a while, the party is making some statements against India. The BNP is, however, very flexible about China. What is the reason behind it?

Fakhrul: The BNP does not do politics for or against any particular country. The party's stance has always been to uphold the interest of the country (Bangladesh). India is our big neighbour, we have always raised our voice about the unresolved issues with India. We are not getting our fair share of water from the Teesta and other common rivers. We have always spoken against it. We are continuing our protest against border killings of Bangladeshis. Our stand against Rampal Power Plant is unequivocal.

China is one of leading economic powerhouses in the world. Bangladesh needs the support of that power. As a political party, we believe in maintaining cordial relations with an economic powerhouse like China.

To talk about the unresolved issues or asking for our fair share does not mean we are anti-India. We believe in maintaining cordial relationship with

China, India, and other countries on the basis of fairness.

DS: Is Oikyafront active now?

Fakhrul: Our Oikyafront is still intact. Everything is not visible all the time for various reasons. Due to government repression, we cannot do proper politics, but our front is intact.

DS: There are reports that Khaleda Zia is not happy with the formation of Oikyafront and its activities. She has expressed her dissatisfaction.

Fakhrul: This is not correct. She has given directives to keep the unity intact. After coming out of jail, she has emphasised on the need for bigger unity.

DS: Does the BNP have ties with the Jamaat-e-Islami?

Fakhrul: Yes, the BNP has ties with Jamaat. The ties remain as it was before. We haven't observed any programme with Jamaat for a long time. We have not observed a programme collectively with Jamaat since 2015.

DS: It is said that the BNP's relations with Jamaat have strained on the war crime trial issue.

Fakhrul: There can be difference of opinion between parties in an alliance. And it can be in the case of the 20-party alliance. But that relations have not strained.

DS: The war crimes trial took place a long time after 1971. Still, the BNP took a stance against the trial of war criminals. Has the BNP opposed the war crimes trial due to its association with Jamaat?

Fakhrul: It is not that the BNP was against the war crimes trial. We were always for the trial, and our position is still the same. We have talked about the quality of the trial. We have criticised the loopholes of the trial process. We should keep in mind that the BNP's founder was a valiant freedom fighter, sector commander and a Bir Uttam. We fought to liberate our country. There are so many freedom fighters in the BNP, a party that cannot oppose the war crimes trial.

DS: But the BNP never advocated for holding the war crimes trials.

Fakhrul: This allegation is not correct. We did not want to politicise the war crimes trial. The Awami League did it. We wanted a fair war crimes trial.

DS: You are carrying out the responsibilities of BNP secretary general for years. Do you think you have lived up to your job?

Fakhrul: I tried. The path of discharging the duty is very tough. But we are moving forward. I think a national unity is badly needed to restore democratic system in the country. I'm a firm believer.