

BANGLADESH UPDATE

1,681
New cases in 24hrs

404,760
Total cases

5,886
Deaths

321,281
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

1,183,859
Deaths

45,185,125
Total cases

Govt working to make Bangladesh self-reliant

PM says at virtual programme for winners of Independence Award 2020

Usb, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said the government was working with a goal to make Bangladesh economically self-reliant and brighten its image so that its people can move in the world stage with dignity.

"We are a victorious nation in the Liberation War. Why should we move begging from others and keeping our head down? The victorious nation will move across the world like victors," she said.

The PM was addressing virtually a function marking the distribution of the Independence Award 2020. She joined the programme, held at the Osmani Memorial Auditorium in the city, through a video conference from the Gono Bhaban.

Eight renowned personalities and one organisation received the Independence Award 2020, the highest state honour.

On behalf of the PM, Liberation War Affairs Minister AKM Mozammel Haque handed the prestigious award to the awardees and their relatives.

Hasina said Bangladesh had lost its potentials after the assassination of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975.

She said her previous government (1996-2001) had started projecting the authentic history of the country's independence before the people.

Remembering the dream of the Father of the Nation and the great sacrifices of millions of martyrs, the premier said her government wants to rebuild Bangladesh as a hunger- and poverty-free "Golden Bengal".

"We are running the state with the aim to achieve the goals of taking healthcare services to the doorsteps of people, ensuring education for all, improving the communication system, illuminating every house, providing every homeless and landless person with a house,

making Bangladesh economically self-sufficient and enhancing its self-dignity."

Talking about the Covid-19 pandemic, Hasina said the government was making frantic efforts to protect people and their livelihood and accelerate the pace of economic development.

She urged all to follow the health guidelines to protect themselves from contracting Covid-19 saying that a resurgence of the virus is now seen in Europe.

Hasina said the government has been making all necessary preparations and it is keeping every district hospital ready to deal with the possible second wave of Covid-19 in the country.

Congratulating the award recipients, she said they have made outstanding contributions to their respective fields, including medical, education and culture.

The awardees are Jute and Textiles Minister Golam Dastagir Gazi, Commander Abdur Rouf (posthumous), martyred intellectual and novelist Anwar Pasha (posthumous) and Azizur Rahman for Independence and Liberation War; Prof Dr Md Obaidul Kabir Chowdhury and Prof Dr AKMA Muqtadir for medical science; Kalipada Das and Ferdousi Mazumder for culture; and Bharateswari Homes, a boarding school for girls in Mirzapur of Tangail, for education.

On February 20, the government had picked the renowned personalities and the organisation for the highest state award.

There is a tradition of handing this prestigious award to the recipients on March 25 each year, but it was not possible this year due to the novel coronavirus outbreak.

Since 1977, Bangladesh has been recognising individuals and institutions with the award ahead of the Independence Day every year.

Ministers, chiefs of the three services and members of parliament were present at the function.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina addresses a function marking the distribution of the Independence Award 2020. She joined the programme, held at the capital's Osmani Memorial Auditorium yesterday, virtually from the Gono Bhaban.

PHOTO: PTI

Govt sits on UGC probe report

FROM PAGE 1

"When he [secretary] joins office, we will sit and have the discussion," Dipu Moni added.

THE PROBE
During the investigation, the probe committee found evidence of 25 kinds of irregularities and corruption done by top members of the university administration.

The allegations included that the VC provided false information to the chancellor on voluntary retirement; he practiced nepotism in recruiting teachers; the VC and the others appointed heads of different departments violating university rules; and officials were involved in irregular financial transactions.

The report said the VC and the others relaxed the university's recruitment policy on purpose and appointed his daughter and son-in-law as teachers. Besides, some 34 low-qualified candidates were recruited as teachers at different departments of the university.

"The teachers' recruitment rules were relaxed with an ill intention Under qualified candidates were recruited in place of many qualified candidates," it said.

Asked about the relaxation of rules, a

committee member said the university authorities lowered the recommended CGPA requirements for the recruitment.

The probe report recommended carrying out an audit of the assets of RU VC, pro-VC, several other teachers, officials and their dependents as they "aided the corruption and irregularities".

The report also suggested removal of RU Registrar Prof Abdul Bari for not cooperating during the investigation.

The issue surfaced after some 62 teachers and two jobseekers submitted a written complaint on January 4 to the PMO office, the education ministry, the UGC and the ACC against the VC and his deputy.

In a 300-page letter, they brought allegations of corruption and nepotism during the recruitment of teachers.

Following directives from the PMO and the ministry, the UGC formed a three-member probe committee, led by Dil Afroz Begum, a UGC member, to probe the allegations.

As a part of the investigation, the UGC also held an open public hearing to collect statements from both the parties.

Talking to the committee members, The Daily Star learnt that the regulatory body submitted a report of 36 pages

and 700 pages of related documents, recommending actions against the teachers.

The probe report also said RU VC Prof Sobhan occupied a duplex of the university for 18 months showing various excuses. It recommended collecting Tk 5.61 lakh in rent from the VC for the house.

On Sunday, the VC held a press conference where he raised questions on the neutrality of the probe body and termed it "one-sided and biased."

He also demanded judicial inquiry into the allegations.

Sobhan said all the allegations against him were "silly, false and fabricated". He alleged that a section of people were trying to replace him and tarnish the image of the university and the government.

On the allegation regarding his daughter and son-in-law, he said the recruitment policy was formulated following rules of the university.

Deputy Education Minister Mohibul Hassan Chowdhury yesterday said, "If the probe was done without following proper procedures, the whole process will become questionable. We will look into the matter after reviewing the UGC probe report."

Italy returnees plunge into further uncertainty

Face stiff challenges in rejoining work as Italy imposes fresh restrictions amid rise in Covid cases

JAMIL MAHMUD

Italy-bound expatriates are facing challenges to get back to their workplaces as many are still waiting for air tickets.

The situation has become more complicated with a recent surge in positive coronavirus cases in the European country.

The expatriates had remained stuck at home for several months and are going through financial hardship.

Italy recorded over 24,991 new Covid-19 cases on Wednesday. The number of such cases was 2,548 on October 1, according to media reports.

On Sunday, Italy President Giuseppe Conte announced a new decree valid until November 24 that includes nationwide closure of gyms, swimming pools, cinemas and theatres. Bars and restaurants have to stop serving by 6:00 in the evening.

Conte said the measures were aimed at averting the need for another national lockdown, reported Ansa, a reputed wire service in Italy.

Stranded Bangladeshi expatriates said further delay in their return might put them in additional economic hardship, while this also could jeopardise their future in Italy.

Sohel Hasan, an expatriate from Shariatpur's Naria, said he returned home from Italy on January 1, but could not go back despite repeated attempts in last nine months.

Sohel, who works at a restaurant in Rome, was waiting at the Turkish Airlines office in the capital's Gulshan on Monday to get his return ticket reissued.

The expatriate said he saw news reports on social media regarding a rise in coronavirus cases in Italy.

"I'm already facing financial

problems. If the new lockdown is imposed and I fail to return to Italy now, then this will be even a bigger problem for me," he added.

He said when he came home in January, he carried "ricevuta", a receipt which he needs to submit before the authorities concerned in Italy immediately to get his stay permit renewed.

In July, Association of Travel Agents of Bangladesh (ATAB) said around 12,000 to 15,000 Bangladeshi workers were waiting to go back to Italy.

They could not return until the Italy government lifted the embargo for Bangladeshis on October 14.

At present, Turkish Airlines, Qatar Airways, and Emirates are carrying Bangladeshis to Italy.

Ejaz Kadry, agent, sales and traffic (Int) of Turkish Airlines, said they had reissued about 700 return tickets to Italy-bound Bangladeshis until Monday.

He also said they were expecting that 1,000 more return tickets would be reissued in the 10 days from last Monday.

Expatriate Khaled Mosharraf, who lives in Rome, said if the Italian government imposes new nationwide restrictions anytime soon, then he might only get the chance to return once the situation becomes normal.

"But there are income issues," he said, adding that his family in Brahmanbaria has been in financial trouble amid the pandemic.

"I see no alternative but to return to Italy now to earn money," said Khaled, who returned home on February 6 on a two-month holiday.

Italy is home to about 1.45 lakh Bangladeshis with valid documents. Besides, an estimated 20,000 more undocumented Bangladeshis live there.

Husband of victim

FROM PAGE 1

actions against the local police and union parishad chairman and member, Deputy Attorney General Nawroz MR Chowdhury told The Daily Star.

The committee, headed by the principal of Noakhali's Chaumuhoni Government SA College, submitted the report to the HC bench of Justice Md Mozibur Rahman Miah and Justice Md Mohi Uddin Shamim.

The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) submitted another report before the HC saying that it has removed from social media a video footage showing the gangrape and torture of the woman.

The HC bench fixed November 29 to hold a hearing on the issue, DAG Nawroz said.

The gangrape and torture took place at Joykrishnapur village of Eklashpur union on September 2. The video footage went viral on social media in the first week of October.

On October 5, the HC bench directed the BTRC chairman to immediately remove the video footage from social media.

The HC also asked the BTRC chairman to record the copy of the video footage on a compact disk or USB drive before removing it from social media.

Issuing a suo moto (voluntary) rule, the HC bench ordered the superintendent of police in Noakhali to

investigate while ensuring all protections to the victim and her family.

At the same time, the HC formed a three-member committee led by the college principal to conduct an inquiry into whether the police were negligent in taking actions against the perpetrators.

Other two members of the committee are additional deputy commissioner of Noakhali and social service officer of Noakhali.

The committee was asked to submit the probe report to the court in 15 days. The HC judges also issued a rule asking the authorities concerned of the government to explain why they should not be directed to take appropriate legal and departmental action against the officials of Begumganj Police Station, including its officer-in-charge, for their negligence in protecting the victim and taking action against the perpetrators quickly.

The HC bench came up with the directives after Supreme Court lawyers ZI Khan Panna and Abdullah Al Mamun placed newspaper reports on the incident before the bench for necessary directives.

The court heard opinions from lawyers including Supreme Court Bar Association President AM Amin Uddin, Secretary Md Ruhul Quddus Kazal, Jyotirmoy Barua, Yadia Zaman, Jamil Haque Faisal, Rashida Chowdhury Nilu and Tanjim Al Islam before passing the orders.

Hell in the desert

FROM PAGE 1

"As our group was released from the centre one-by-one, a new group including 28 Bangladeshis were brought into the same camp in early September," said Aiman, speaking to The Daily Star from Tripoli.

But just how many Bangladeshis are being imprisoned, and where, is something that the Bangladesh mission in Tripoli cannot track, largely owing to the conflict-ridden landscape of the country -- currently ruled by at least two "governments" and also fragmented into territories ruled by militias.

"There are many such camps all over Libya run by the militias where Bangladeshis are often held," said ASM Ashraf Islam, labour counsellor of the Bangladesh High Commission in Tripoli.

"They are usually imprisoned by traffickers when they try to go to Europe." Aiman went to Libya two years ago.

"I studied in a madrasa in Noakhali and had no job after finishing school, so I migrated to Libya to work as a pipe fitter. But there was little work that year," he said.

When the pandemic arrived on top of the ongoing civil war in the country -- struggling to make ends meet, he decided to go to Italy.

"I could go back to Bangladesh, but I would have no money and no future. I had to tough it out," said Aiman.

He managed to pay a Bangladeshi human trafficker named Md Mokhlesur Rahman in Libya to go to Italy. This correspondent attempted to reach that man but he did not respond to repeated calls.

"We set off from a coastal town called Zawia, 50km from Tripoli. We had made it out to sea when we were intercepted by a mafia. They brought us back to land and detained us for several days," said Aiman.

"We called the trafficker [Mokhles] and he said he is sending two drivers to fetch us. The drivers, instead of taking us somewhere safe, drove us out to the desert."

"Once in the desert, we could not get out of the car, because we would die of thirst in the Sahara."

To this day, he is not sure who sold them to the camp -- the drivers or the human trafficker.

They were blindfolded at one point before entering Brak al-Shati, so Aiman does not know exactly where the camp is. "But there was a gas or oil factory beside it," he said.

He also does not know when he arrived there -- he lost count of the dates during his period of detention.

"There were two Bangladeshi translators in the camp, named Hridoy and Islam, but I doubt those are their real names. They translated the demands of the mafia to us," said Aiman.

They demanded Tk 10 lakh from each of the migrants. They tortured the men -- but Aiman, understandably, was reluctant to recall the details.

"They tortured us the way people are usually tortured. They video-called our family members and tortured us on the call. In addition, they starved us. We only

got a piece of bread every morning," he said.

Several videos leaked to law enforcement agencies from the "campus" -- like the one Aiman was held in -- show that brutal forms of torture are inflicted on the hostages.

The videos show Bangladeshi migrants laid out on the ground with their legs held up between a wooden clamp. Their captors repeatedly whipped the soles of their feet, leaving criss-crossing welts across the skin, making the men writhe in pain.

"Abba send money, Abba they will kill me!" one man implored, crying in pain. "Please no more, I can't take it!" another said.

Aiman's mother learnt about her son's captivity one month and 18 days after he went off the radar.

"My son has a distant uncle in Tripoli, and the traffickers contacted him. He contacted us and told us to send over Tk 10 lakh. He gave us different phone numbers for sending mobile money, and a bank account number too," she said.

The money was handed over to the traffickers by Aiman's uncle on August 3. Aiman was released on August 8.

"I was the first to get released," he said. His friend Osama (not his real name) followed soon after.

Osama's father, speaking to The Daily Star from Lakhmipur, said he had to send over around Tk 12-13 lakh.

"My son called me and told me that he is being tortured by the mafia. I am a small businessman but I took loans, managed the money, and transferred it to a Bangladeshi bank account given to me after Eid-ul-Azha," he said.

"They tortured my son so much, he needed to be hospitalised there. I paid his medical bills," he added.

Aiman added, "Osama and I went to the Bangladesh Embassy to report the incident. We told them details of everything that happened. We told them that there were many Bangladeshis being held captive, but they did not help."

"A second group of 28 Bangladeshis were brought to the camp in September ... my friend who was released a few days back, told me of this."

Labour Counsellor Ashraful confirmed that they received reports of a group of Bangladeshis being caught by the mafia in mid-June and transported to Brak al-Shati.

"But we don't know how many there are in the camp right now, or who they are, because the ones who got out, do not keep in touch with us," he said.

"It is also not possible for us to just go to these militia-held areas in the middle of the Sahara desert to rescue Bangladeshis, because we do not have the support needed for that."

Tripoli, where the Bangladesh Embassy is based, is governed by the internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), while Brak al-Shati is in an area governed by the opposing Libyan National Army (LNA), led by military commander Khalifa Haftar.

It is a dangerous area -- the top news reference of Brak al-Shati is that of a 2017

clash between LNA and a paramilitary group called Benghazi Defence Brigades there, leaving 141 people killed.

Ashraful said he alerted law enforcement agencies in Bangladesh about the migrants in Brak al-Shati.

However, the relevant ministries seem unaware of this news concerning the migrants.

Director-General (Africa Wing) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maleka Parveen said she did not receive any communication about this from the embassy in Tripoli. "I can ask them and let you know," she said.

Bashir Ahmed, additional secretary (Employment Wing) of the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, said, "We have not got any complaints regarding this."

Syedra Zannat Ara, special superintendent of police (serious crimes and homicide) of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), who is investigating the Mizdah massacre, was not also made aware of Aiman's group in Brak al-Shati.

"There are many such camps in Libya we heard," she said.

CID is currently cracking down on Bangladeshi human traffickers based in Libya who were responsible for the massacre in Mizdah.

Nine survivors of the massacre were brought back to Dhaka last month and the CID has recorded their statements.

A total of 26 cases have been filed in this regard -- 15 of which were filed by CID. A total of 44 people have been arrested in these cases.

But the phenomenon of detaining migrants for ransom is so vast, and so deep-rooted in the migration scenario of Libya, that these efforts by law enforcement agencies are only beginning to scratch the surface.

"The embassy cannot protect us, so we stopped picking up their calls. I need to stay here to work and send Tk 10 lakh back home," said Aiman, who now works as an undocumented migrant at a sweetmeat factory for a fraction of his previous salary.

His mother concurred with him. "All the money I sent, I had to loan. If my son sends even Tk 10, it will be more than what I have now," she said.

On September 24, Amnesty International published an investigation report titled "Between life and death: Refugees and migrants trapped in Libya's cycle of abuse" documenting detention and torture in Libya.

"Tens of thousands of refugees and migrants in Libya are trapped in a vicious cycle of cruelty with little to no hope of finding safe and legal pathways out. After enduring unconscionable suffering in Libya, refugees and migrants risk their lives at sea seeking safety in Europe, only to be intercepted, transferred back to Libya and delivered to the same abuses they sought to escape," the report said.

"Refugees and migrants intercepted at sea by the Libyan Coast Guard are brought back to Libya, where they are subjected to enforced disappearances, indefinite and arbitrary detention, torture and extortion," it also stated.

'HURTING' RELIGIOUS SENTIMENT

College girl held in Dinajpur

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

A college girl from a minority community was arrested on Wednesday night on charges of hurting religious sentiments in Dinajpur's Parbatipur upazila.

Hours before the arrest, at least five policemen were injured in a clash between police and agitating locals.

Protesters hurled bricks targeting the law enforcers, and a case was filed yesterday in this regard against 22 named and several hundred unnamed people, said police.

The agitators alleged that the girl made a comment hurting religious sentiments on another's Facebook post on October 27.

A day later, a local social organisation Ridoy-e Parbatipur filed a general diary with Parbatipur Model Police Station in this connection and police brought the girl and her parents to the station for interrogation.

The arrestee claimed she did not make any such comment.

Around 35 people were present there while the interrogation was going on. At one stage, offered everyone an apology while repeatedly claiming that she in no way had anything to do with the comment.

As the issue was settled there, police let the girl and her family members go home, the girl's father told The Daily Star over the phone.

Meanwhile, screenshots of the Facebook post went viral on social media. An "influential person" of Parbatipur played a key role in making it viral, alleged locals.

Around 9:30pm on Wednesday, several hundred locals gathered near Parbatipur Model Police Station and staged a demonstration demanding the girl's arrest.

They burnt tires in front of the station and clashed with police. Hours later, police filed a case against the girl under the Digital Security Act.

In the meantime, the girl and her family sensed trouble and tried to leave the area that same night. They boarded a train from Parbatipur with the aim to go to Shantahar.

But the Bangladesh Government Railway Police (GRP) stopped the train and arrested the girl at around 9:45pm.

She was then handed over to Parbatipur Model Police Station, said Emdadul Haq, officer-in charge of Parbatipur GRP.

Even after her arrest, locals kept staging demonstrations in different areas yesterday, demanding the girl's punishment.

By the time the situation calmed down, it was 1:30 early yesterday.

The incident has spread panic among the Hindu community in the area.

Seeking anonymity, a local level leader of Bangladesh Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Oikya Parishad, told The Daily Star that they are afraid that the protesters might launch attacks on Hindus in the area after Jumma prayer today.

Contacted, Moklesur Rahman, OC of Parbatipur Model Police Station, said police were directed to avoid an untoward situation.

Speaking to The Daily Star, the Parishad's central general secretary said communal and fundamentalist groups found this new technique to torture minorities by spreading rumours on social media.

"I would like to request law enforcers and government high-ups to trace the perpetrators and bring them to book for the sake of maintaining communal harmony."

Miladunnabi today

FROM PAGE 1

The Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had started observing Eid-e-Miladunnabi nationally from 1973.

Different government and non-government organisations, including the Islamic Foundation, have drawn up programmes to mark the day.

President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday issued separate messages on the eve of the day, greeting the countrymen and the Muslims across the world.

On the occasion of the day, Islamic Foundation has taken up a fortnight-long special programme.

The programme includes delivering sermons on the life and works of Prophet Muhammad (SM) after Maghrib and Isha prayers every day, recitation from the holy Quran, singing of Islamic songs, and organising seminars jointly with Bangladesh Betar.

Bangladesh Television (BTV) and Bangladesh Betar will broadcast special programmes highlighting the importance of the day.

The day is a public holiday.

Trump, Biden

FROM PAGE 1

person appearance of the 2020 race, though Obama has been delivering strategically timed broadsides at Trump throughout.

Trump, by contrast, is finishing his campaign in an extreme test of endurance, with a final attempt to catch up both in swing states and also states that he won in 2016 but now has to defend.