

BANGLADESH
UPDATE



1,318
New cases in 24hrs



4,98,293
Total cases



7,217
Deaths



4,33,614
Recoveries

GLOBAL
UPDATE



1,675,595
Deaths



75,701,147
Total cases

Ensure justice seekers get verdict copies without delay

President urges judges

UNB, Dhaka

President Abdul Hamid yesterday called upon judges to ensure that “justice-seekers do not have to keep coming back to the court for days even after the verdict in a case is delivered”.

The president is thought to have been referring to the situation where inordinate delays ensue between the delivery of a summarised or short verdict in a case and the full judgement release.

Most of the time, petitioners are unable to avail any relief awarded by the court before the release of the judgement, at which point the case can be said to have been disposed of.

“As a lawyer, I know how difficult and complicated the judicial proceeding is and how much effort a judge has to give. But even then, I would say that the judges need to do more to keep pace with the growing number of cases,” Hamid said while delivering his speech on the “Supreme Court Day-2020” virtually from the Bangabhaban.

He said conducting the court proceedings virtually has made it possible for the judges to ensure justice without the physical presence of people on the court premises during the pandemic.

“An online cause list has now been introduced in the Supreme Court, and the online bail confirmation system is working effectively,” the president added.

Calling for all court proceedings to be carried out digitally, Hamid said, “Since the Supreme Court is the ‘Court of Record,’ it is crucial to preserve all of its documents and activities -- from the filing of the case to the announcement of the verdict -- digitally.”

Govt extends

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outside the purview of the government’s directive.
The public and private universities will also remain closed till January 16.
However, the University Grants Commission during a virtual meeting with the vice chancellors of 39 public universities on December 13, directed that they can hold honours and masters final examinations following proper health safety measures if the respective academic councils approve.
The first novel coronavirus cases in the country were detected on March 8. The government on March 17 closed the schools, hampering academic activities of around four crore students.
It extended the closure several times as the pandemic showed little sign of abating. The long closure led to cancellation of examinations and left academic calendars in disarray.
The fresh extension comes at a time when the country is moving closer to the 500,000 mark of Covid-19 cases. The tally of confirmed coronavirus cases now stands at 498,293 after the health authorities reported 1,318 new infections in 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday.
There has also been a spike in the number of deaths for the last few weeks. Twenty-five more people died from Covid-19 during the same 24-hour period, according to a press release issued by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).
The total number of deaths now stands at 7,217 and the death rate is 1.45 percent.
Among the 25 deceased, 16 are men and nine women. Four of the deceased were aged between 41 and 50, nine between 51 and 60 while 12 were aged above 60.
PUBLIC EXAMS, SCHOOL ADMISSION CANCELLED
The epidemic has resulted in the cancellation of the Higher Secondary Certificate and equivalent exams, originally slated for April 1. For preparing HSC exam results, candidates are evaluated based on their results in JSC and SSC tests.
The government also cancelled Primary Education Completion and its equivalent exams, and Junior School Certificate and its equivalent exams due to the pandemic.
More than one crore students of classes six to ten will be promoted to the next classes this year without any annual examinations, the government announced. Instead, school authorities are giving assignments to students.
To avoid health risks amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the government moved to enroll students at schools for all classes for next academic session on the basis of lottery. The application process will be completed online. The lottery is scheduled to be held on December 30.
Because of the pandemic, the government will not hold the Textbook Festival on January 1 when textbooks are handed to primary and secondary students for free.
The authorities also delayed introduction of the new curricula by a year.

Toxic ships sail in on false papers

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equipment to prevent the fibres from entering his lungs.

Asbestos is rife in Sitakunda, where most of Bangladesh’s shipbreaking workers live and work. Furniture shops sell cheap “asbestos ovens” for as little as Tk 250 (£2.20), popular with low-wage workers.

The raw materials, say shopkeepers, are supplied by the shipbreaking yards.

The powerful shipbreaking industry, which generates around half of Bangladesh’s raw steel supply, is frequently shamed in the international media for its devastating impact on workers’ lives and the environment.

But nearly a decade after the government was forced by the Supreme Court to introduce rules to protect workers like Mazidul, an investigation from The Daily Star and Finance Uncovered, a UK journalism organisation, suggests that a major part of the regulatory system is a sham.

These rules banned the import of vessels for scrap containing a range of hazardous materials including asbestos. And they demanded that shipowners must submit certificates to the Bangladesh authorities declaring their vessels have been “pre-cleaned” of these.

Our investigation obtained a cache of 28 such certificates. Each had been submitted to, and accepted by, the ministry of environment.

But respected ship recycling experts in Europe told us the documents were worthless. One branded them “rubbish”.

Even government officials privately admitted to us the certificates are not realistic, but they insisted they do not have the means to check the declarations through meaningful inspections.

Md Shahab Uddin, minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, said the ministry has plans to set up modernised laboratories to test such toxic materials.

“As the responsibility is given to the environment ministry to check the toxic material, we are determined to do whatever is needed to do to stop any malpractice,” he said.

Of the 28 documents obtained by The Daily Star, 17 were from companies registered in secretive offshore tax havens, making it difficult to hold them accountable.

Earlier this year, the Supreme Court ruled in a case brought by the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (Bela) against the state in connection with shipbreaking regulations. Its judgment was damning: it found that documents used to import a toxic vessel for scrap in 2016 were “superficially prepared” or “fabricated”.

The findings of our investigation now suggest the issue may be widespread -- with the role of offshore companies being a key aspect.

Lawyer Syeda Rizwana Hasan, director of Bela, said, “Officials have been allowing vessels to enter Bangladesh knowing full well that the country has no preparation to deal with the waste.

“It’s time to go heavily against such malpractices to ensure that cash buyers and their allies in the government are held liable if they continue to resort to their heinous tactics.”

She added, “Cash buyers are hiding behind anonymously owned offshore companies so we can’t hold them liable for the damage they cause.”

Dozens of workers have died in the yards in recent years according to local NGOs, but more still will suffer early deaths from their exposure to materials like asbestos.

Multinational shipping firms appear to have distanced themselves from these deaths in part by selling their end-of-life vessels to so-called cash buyers, many of them based offshore where their ownership is kept secret. These companies specialise in sending ships to scrap but also provide a firewall between the yards and PR-conscious shipowners.

Bangladesh is a signatory of the Basel Convention, which is supposed to stop hazardous waste being dumped in developing countries. In 2009 the Supreme Court ruled that, in keeping with this convention, ships should be cleared of their hazardous materials before they are imported for demolition in Bangladesh.

Two years later, the government imposed the import ban on toxic ships and introduced rules requiring shipowners to provide certificates showing no hazardous wastes on board.

Inspectors are then supposed to visit the ships at anchorage to check the vessels for hazardous materials before giving permission for scrapping.

But according to Rizwana, by allowing shipowners to self-certify the waste they contain, the government set up a system which was bound to fail and open to potential abuse.

And when contacted by The Daily Star, the senior government officials charged with responsibility for shipbreaking appeared to be ignorant of what the rules demanded.

In its judgment earlier this year, the Supreme Court found that the government had failed to implement this system in the case of the North



A worker, without any protective gear, climbs up a rope ladder on to the deck of a ship being dismantled in Sitakunda of Chattogram. Lack of safety measures often lead to deadly accidents at shipbreaking yards. The photo was taken in January.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Sea Producer, an ageing oil tanker previously owned by Maersk and sent from the UK to be broken up in Chattogram. The court found that the presence of hazardous materials on the vessel had been “deliberately concealed or left vague”.

It singled out a document supplied by a company based in the Caribbean tax haven of Saint Kitts and Nevis, claiming the ship contained no hazardous materials on board, including “nil” asbestos.

It was later discovered that the ship had illegal levels of radioactive waste on board, and according to documents submitted to the court, 500kg of materials containing asbestos was removed from the vessel.

The rules have been amended a number of times in the last decade, meaning that there has been disagreement over whether they required hazardous materials to be

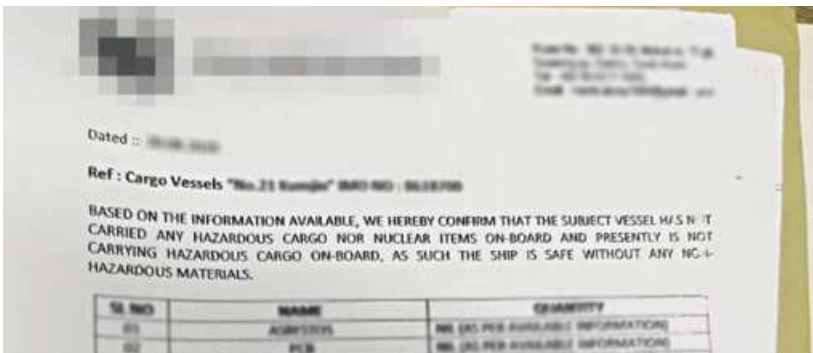
recycling consultancy which works with yards in the EU, Turkey and China, said the declarations on the certificates are “rubbish”.

Most ships headed for the beaches in South Asia were built decades before international rules banned the use of asbestos in shipbuilding in 2011.

“You’ll find asbestos in the gaskets, in the fuel lines, in the sea water lines, in the firefighting lines,” Rozenveld explained. “You cannot operate a vessel without these things. The workers who clear this will in decades die of asbestosis.”

He said it would only be possible to clean a ship completely after cutting the ship down to its bare steel, which would take months of work from asbestos-trained workers.

“To do this removal would take a team on board for three months and it would cost you millions.”



A pre-cleaning certificate submitted by a South Korea-based company to the Department of Environment of Bangladesh to get approval for a ship to be dismantled in Sitakunda.

moved from the ship’s structure.

But the Supreme Court ruling in the North Sea Producer case directed the government to “stringently regulate” cash buyers and enforce the pre-cleaning system.

Maersk has yet to comment on the matter.

Interestingly, the pre-cleaning certificates obtained by The Daily Star contain identical wording to the North Sea Producer document.

Of the 28 certificates leaked to The Daily Star, half were submitted by companies based in secretive tax havens, including five from St Kitts and Nevis. Ownership of “offshore” companies like these -- which stand to make million dollar profits on their deals -- is a tightly guarded secret.

According to Rizwana, cash buyers’ use of anonymous companies protects their true owners from potential liability for the damage they cause.

A third of the vessels in the cache used flags of convenience like Palau and St Kitts and Nevis, which are blacklisted by European port authorities for their poor enforcement of international shipping conventions.

Many of the certificates declare: “Based on the information available, we hereby confirm that the subject vessel [is] not carrying hazardous cargo nor nuclear items on board and presently is not carrying hazardous cargo onboard. As such, the ship is safe without any non-hazardous material.”

Around half the certificates then list the materials that the ships are clear from. First on the list is asbestos, frequently stating, “Nil -- based on the available information”.

Wouter Rozenveld, who runs a ship

certificates do not accurately describe the hazardous materials aboard the vessels.

But they say the problem is that if authorities impose restrictions regarding this, the shipbreaking industry would not exist: if scrutinised thoroughly, poisonous substances would be found onboard every ship.

Pre-cleaning is expensive and a regime that strictly imposed it could mark the end for Bangladesh’s beaching yards. One of the main reasons that places like Sitakunda are so popular for scrapping ships is that they are so cheap to use.

The International Maritime Organisation (IMO) is supporting Bangladesh in its efforts to bring yards up to standards set by the Hong Kong Convention, which sets out rules intended to protect workers and the environment from the damage they could cause.

Under that convention, all ships destined for demolition must have a full Inventory of Hazardous Materials, a detailed document marking the presence and location of all hazardous materials on the ship, along with a ship recycling plan agreed with the yard where recycling is set to take place.

But campaigners say these rules themselves are unacceptable as they would continue to allow thousands of tonnes of hazardous waste to be dumped each year in Bangladesh, which the country has no means to deal with. They also argue such standards would contradict Bangladesh’s own apparent ban on importing hazardous materials in ships.

Those familiar with the practices in Sitakunda say while some yards are making efforts to improve worker protections, far more is needed to satisfy the Hong Kong Convention standards.

Without these changes, workers like Mazidul Haque are likely to continue being exposed to asbestos.

The Daily Star talked to workers from five shipyards of Sitakunda about the protective gear and training they were given in their work.

Sahab Uddin says when he started working in 2010 at Khawaja Ship Breaking Yard he received no training.

“I started dismantling ships at the yard as a cutter man back in 2010 with no knowledge of the risks.... I came to learn about the risk as I lost my fellow colleagues in accidents like explosion, suffocation or fire incidents,” he said.

And although the yards now make protective gear available, the workers often remove it under pressure to work faster.

Another worker, preferring anonymity, said because the shipyards use loans to buy the vessels, they are in a hurry to pay them off quickly and avoid interest payments.

“That is why they want us to break the ship faster. The faster the ship is dismantled, the better for the owner. But it puts us at huge risk of accidents. We cannot wear proper protective gear fearing it would decelerate our speed,” he added.

Leading cash buyers Wirana and Global Marketing Systems (GMS), were contacted to comment on what basis they made declarations that the vessels were free of hazardous materials, and whether they were based on an Inventory of Hazardous Materials.

Only GMS, the world’s biggest cash buyer, which also acted as the agent for the import of the North Sea Producer, provided a response.

GMS instructed London law firm Carter Ruck to respond. Nigel Tait, a partner at the firm, said in a response that pre-cleaning certificates were based on an Inventory of Hazardous Materials provided by the original shipowners, and “reputable third party surveyors and agencies who have conducted the pre-cleaning”.

However, he also said the hazardous waste that forms part of the vessel’s structure would not be removed because it would create “safety issues while sailing”.

He said there was no legal requirement to strip backships to their bare steel to remove all hazardous materials from the ships’ structures.

“Our client ensures that, in compliance with the Sustainable Ship and Offshore Recycling Programme, the relevant green teams (with hazmat experts) inspect the vessel and mark all potential parts/material that could contain hazardous material.”

On whether asbestos was identified, he said, “Separate asbestos decontamination rooms are provided for individual yards in Bangladesh and safely disposed of in a vertical concrete column.”

He maintained that GMS had acted legally throughout.

Now unemployed, Mazidul Haque is struggling to support his wife, mother, two sons and daughter. They are currently living on microloans, but he has no idea how he will repay them.

At the point of despair, he is now working to raise awareness about the deadly issue. He has urged the government to make sure workers are no longer exposed to asbestos.

Without that, many more workers like him will continue to suffer.

[Pinaki Roy of The Daily Star also contributed to the report]

LABOUR-RECEIVING COUNTRIES

Govt ready to negotiate low-cost hiring

Says expatriates’ welfare minister

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Expatriates Welfare Minister Imran Ahmad yesterday said he was ready to negotiate different issues with labour receiving countries to send abroad as many workers as possible at low cost.

“But I will not go down this road if I find that my country and workers are being affected,” he said.

The minister was responding to a question from a reporter on reopening of Malaysia’s labour market for Bangladeshi workers during a press conference at his ministry.

The press conference was organised marking the International Migrants Day.

Malaysia suspended hiring Bangladeshi workers in September, 2018 after allegations about high recruitment costs and syndication surfaced.

The two countries held meetings on multiple occasions since then. However, the market is yet to be opened for Bangladeshi workers.

Bangladesh already discussed reopening of the market with Malaysia at a meeting this year after the new government assumed office in the Southeast Asian country, the minister said.

Malaysia will set a date for holding the next meeting of the Joint Working Group, Imran said. “Hopefully, we will be able to clear the sticking points [at that meeting].”

About observing the International Migrants Day, the minister said the government would organise its main programme marking the occasion on January 6 next. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will attend the programme virtually as chief guest.

This year has been different than previous years considering the novel coronavirus pandemic, said Imran, adding that many migrant workers, especially those stranded after coming home from Saudi Arabia on vacation, have returned to their workplaces.

He said although there was an apprehension that about 10 lakh migrant workers might return home amid the pandemic, about 3.26 lakh have returned so far according to ministry data.

The minister said migrant workers have sent home \$10.9 billion in remittance in the first five months of the current fiscal year, up by over \$3 billion from the amount sent during the same period of the last fiscal year.

Imran said the government was ready to allocate more money to support migrant workers affected by Covid-19 in addition to its already declared Tk 700 crore loan schemes.

He called upon the media to report on migrant workers’ issues covering all aspects.

The minister said workers have already started flying to Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates for jobs. Besides, Jordan will recruit about 12,000 new workers from Bangladesh next year.

The expatriates’ welfare ministry is working to set up new technical training centres across the country to facilitate training of workers, he added.

Capacity up

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reported the first death from the virus.
The death rate stands at 1.45 percent and there are 4,96,975 people infected with the coronavirus, according to the DGHS. The Covid-19 testing began in the country on January 21 and the first three cases were reported on March 8.

In Bangladesh, 17,398 out of every one million people have so far been tested whereas the number is 625,164 in the United States, 382,729 in Italy and 106,639 in India, according to www.worldometers.info.

DGHS Director General Prof ABM Khurshid Alam said the facilities were now capable of testing over 20,000 samples a day.

“But if people don’t come for tests, what can we do? Tackling a pandemic is not the task of only a ministry. Rather, it requires a coordinated effort,” he added.

‘TESTS SHOULD BE FREE’

Md Khairul (not his real name) and his wife have fever, cough, sore throat, and have lost the sense of taste and smell. But they chose not to get tested.

“We have consulted our family physician and are observing the situation,” he said.

Laila Begum Lata, a housewife, said she considers the tests as a “hassle”. Her husband recently tested positive and she and her daughter had the symptoms.

“I don’t go outside and my condition is not bad. That’s why I did not get tested,” she said.

Muzaherul Huq, former regional advisor for South East Asia at the World Health Organization, said people should be made aware of the necessity of tests.

“Tests should be free for everyone. We have to keep in mind that without more tests we cannot contain the pandemic. It will linger on,” he said.