

BANGLADESH UPDATE



11,53
New cases in 24hrs



5,00,713
Total cases



7,280
Deaths



4,37,527
Recoveries



1,694,670
Deaths



76,771,744
Total cases

Process on to buy modern fighter jets

Says PM at President Parade (Winter)-2020

Bss, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said process was on to purchase ultra-modern and high-performance fighter planes for Bangladesh Air Force as part of the government's move to implement the "Forces Goal-2030".



"The process is underway to purchase more modern and high-performance fighter planes and other equipment for the air force aimed at making it further developed and modern to implement the 'Forces Goal-2030'," she said while addressing virtually as the chief guest at "President Parade (Winter)-2020" from the Gono Bhaban.

The BAF is going to get the air defence system integration, unmanned aerial vehicle system, mobile gap filler radar and ultra-modern air defence radar soon, she said.

The premier further said that her government has signed an agreement to purchase five C-130J transport aircrafts and three of those have already reached the country. A PT-6 Simulator is set to be inducted soon.

To ensure proper and developed training for the air cadets, seven K-8W jet trainer aircraft have already been added to the fleet of the air force, she continued, saying, "The government is firmly committed to continue the pace of advancement of the air force."

The PM said they have taken measures for overall development of the air force following the footsteps of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The PM said that they have recently opened Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Aviation and Aerospace University, adding, "We will attain ability in building fighter planes, transport aircrafts, and helicopters with the knowledge to be obtained from the university."

She recalled the contribution of Bangabandhu in building the armed forces with limited resources during

his three and a half years of tenure alongside rebuilding a war-ravaged country.

The PM said that Bangabandhu had then purchased the most modern fighter jets Mig-21, modern transport aircraft, air defence system and helicopters for the air force.

Bangladesh Air Force arranged a spectacular parade and fly past at its Jashore Academy marking the occasion which the PM virtually witnessed.

Chief of air staff air chief marshal masihuzzaman serniabat later gave a vote of thanks to the prime minister for joining the programme.

He, on behalf of the prime minister, earlier distributed 'Sword of Honour', 'Chief of Air Staff Trophy', 'Commandants Trophy' and other prizes among the best cadets.

Hasina called upon the cadets of the air force to serve the nation being imbued with the spirit of the Liberation War and patriotism.

She said, "I want to tell each of the members of the air force to keep in mind that we had achieved independence through a war. So, you would have to make yourself prepared enough so that you can move around the world keeping your heads high."

The prime minister said that her government has been working tirelessly to do whatever necessary for the armed forces so their personnel could compete with the members of army, navy and air forces of other countries with whom they are working in the UN peacekeeping missions.

She greeted the air force personnel as they extended helping hands in face of the Covid-19 pandemic, saying, "You have set an example with the measures to bring medicare equipment from China and South Korea alongside reaching humanitarian assistances to different countries, including the Maldives and Lebanon and bringing the Bangladeshi nationals who were stranded in different countries during the pandemic to our homelands."

Rail probe blames RHD

FROM PAGE 1
probe committee, led by Nasir Uddin, divisional transport officer (Paksey) of Bangladesh Railway (BR), submitted their report on Saturday night.

They also made several recommendations to prevent recurrence of such accidents, Nasir told The Daily Star yesterday.

The accident happened around 7:00am Saturday when intercity train Uttara Express from Dinajpur was on its way to Rajshahi, said police, quoting locals.

Even though the train was approaching, the bus, which was heading towards Dinajpur's Hakimpur, tried to go over the lines finding the gate open, they said.

The train then hit the bus and dragged it for around 300 metres.

PROBE FINDINGS
Nasir Uddin said gatekeeper Nayan was on duty when the accident happened.

"He was there [level crossing]. But he told us that he could not hear the sound of a train approaching," said Nasir, adding, "He was either sleeping or drowsy. So, he could not lower the gate on time," he added.

The bus driver, who was killed in the accident, was supposed to cross the level crossing slowly and carefully, but it seemed he did not do that, so he was also responsible for the accident.

Besides, the RHD, without informing the railway authorities, demolished the speed breakers near the level crossing while reconstructing the road, he said.

"If there was a speed breaker, the driver would have had to slow down and the accident might not have happened. So, the RHD can't avoid its responsibility," he said.

He said they have made four recommendations, including installation of telephone lines at all level crossing gates, so that station masters can inform gatekeepers about train approaching beforehand.

They also suggested installing "approach bells" at all level crossings so that people can be aware of train approaching.

MANY CROSSINGS NOT MANNED

Although many level crossings are unauthorised and do not have dedicated gatemen, Puranpoil level crossing is an authorised and manned one, the rail authorities said.

Out of 1,468 authorised level crossings, only 564 have dedicated manpower, according to railway documents.

Moreover, there are 1,200 unauthorised level crossings under the 3,018km railway networks in the country, the documents show.

At least nine government bodies were involved in constructing unauthorised level crossings, with the Local Government Engineering Department having constructed the highest 427 gates.

They have constructed such level crossings without taking permission from the railway authorities and do not have dedicated gatekeepers, resulting in frequent accidents, said officials.

The BR authorities on several occasions wrote to these agencies, and some cases were filed against the authorities concerned, but situation did not change, they added.

Some 91 train accidents took place during 2018-19 fiscal year. Of them, 78 were for train derailments and 10 for trains crashing into things, according to railway information book-2019.

Asked about the unmanned level crossings, Mihir Kanti Guha, general manager (west) of BR, said recruitment in BR remained halted for several years after its recruitment rules was repealed, leading to manpower shortage.

However, new recruitment rules have already been approved and recruitment of manpower will start soon, he added.

About the illegal level crossings, he said on many occasions they wrote to the authorities concerned, but they are least bothered about it.

However, the LGED, in a recent inter-ministerial meeting, agreed to take prior permission to construct level crossings, he added.

Besides the LGED, no other agencies are yet to respond, he added.

Allegations baseless

FROM PAGE 1
indulged in misconduct and irregularities, including spending Tk 2 crore for delivering speeches as "special speakers at trainings ahead of elections" and Tk 8.08 crore in recruiting staffers for the commission.

Three election commissioners have also allegedly been using cars in violation of relevant rules.

The letter said the EC was involved in gross misconduct and irregularities in buying and using the electronic voting machines, and in holding the 11th parliamentary election, and also elections to Dhaka north and south city corporations, and Khulna, Gazipur, Sylhet, Barishal and Rajshahi city corporations.

"These allegations may be ill motivated and I don't think there is any ground for the allegations,"

Shahadat said. They have presented their case before the president and he would decide what to do about it, Shahadat said.

He said the eminent citizens brought allegations based on some news. "We have issued rejoinders against these news. I am not sure whether they have noticed the rejoinders."

"I do not need to use additional cars and I believe that other commissioners also do not need to use additional cars."

He said they were given government cars three years after taking oath. "I do not know what a luxurious car is. Even UNOs are using the same model," he added.

He refused to make any comment when asked if they would take any steps against the eminent personalities.



Even though just a few feet away, two locals in Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila's Roypara village are barely visible because of the thick fog that covered the area like a blanket yesterday morning. PHOTO: S DILIP ROY

India claims they open fire in self-defence

FROM PAGE 1

cannot answer on their behalf. They have promised to implement it and we want to trust them.

DS: How can the media play a role in this matter?

Momen: You may ask this question to Indian politicians. It is worthless to ask me.

DS: Is there any progress in ending border killings?

Momen: We have been discussing the issue with the Indian government for long. The Indian government has already told us that they would no longer use any lethal weapons at the border. The Indian prime minister has reiterated this today [December 17].

They also want to end border killings. But the one thing they have said is that there is still criminal activity there and the criminals use lethal weapons. So, we have to be alert. The criminals may use lethal weapons and explosives and attack Indian Border Security Force (BSF) personnel. It is not fair. They may even attack BSF men after entering Indian territory. This cannot be called "border killing".

This can be termed "killing inside India". Many times, people die inside Indian territory, far from the border. They trespass into Indian territory for illegal trading. They often face trouble centring illegal financial dealings. Then, they are killed. The media should disseminate news on the reasons behind illegal financial dealings. You should expose it.

DS: In many cases, we get information from BGB sources that people are shot dead inside Bangladesh territory. **Momen:** Criminals may die inside Bangladesh territory, but the numbers of such cases is very low. Similar incidents happen in every country across the world; not only in Bangladesh. Around 1,000 people die every year in similar incidents in the USA. The number this year is around 1,040. Police have killed them. So, these incidents are not unique to Bangladesh. We don't want anyone to be shot dead, but this is happening across the world. It is a fact of life. We will be happy if you can build a world where no unnatural deaths happen.

DS: Are there no alternative ways to solve the problem, instead of shooting people?

Momen: India is saying they have to open fire on criminals in "self-defence". You know there are many criminals in the border areas. You may collect information on them and file investigative reports on this issue. In many cases, criminals have explosives in their possession. These allegations have been raised from the Indian side. We have not investigated it.

DS: Should the Bangladesh government investigate the allegations?

Momen: Yes, of course. **DS:** How will Bangladesh benefit through the agreements and MoUs signed at the summit?

Momen: India is our big neighbour. We are getting benefits in many ways as we have a good relationship with them. Our people go there for medical purposes. India also has big investments in our country But I cannot give you the exact, accurate information right now. We feel secure. If we soured relations with our neighbour, we could not feel secure. India is providing us different types of assistance on multiple issues. India too feels secure for having good relations with us. Both countries have the common target of eliminating terrorism. So, the activities of terrorists have been significantly curtailed.

DS: What is the latest status of discussions with India over the Rohingya issue?

Momen: India agrees with us that Rohingyas will have to return to their homeland. This is the solution. India will provide all-out cooperation to this end. They believe that repatriation of Rohingyas is the only solution.

DS: But India was neutral and refrained from voting in the United Nations over this issue. This drew huge criticism.

Momen: It is a strategy of India. India did not vote in our favour. They were neutral as part of their strategy. They informed us about the matter before. They said, "We will not vote for you because we want to be neutral. We have to compromise with Myanmar over some issues." This is the Indian strategy.

DS: But China voted for Myanmar... **Momen:** China did it out of their own interest. We cannot force China to change it. We cannot force China

to stop supporting Myanmar. This is their policy. They told us that they are helping us. They have already helped us in some ways, but that does not mean we can direct them.

DS: What is the latest status of discussions with Myanmar about repatriating the Rohingyas?

Momen: Our last discussion was held on January 20 this year. We formed a committee in that meeting. Our DG (director general) and Myanmar ambassador were included in the committee. It was an effective discussion where Myanmar told us that they have prepared booklets over the Rohingya issue. We hope to get a good result soon.

DS: Will the process of relocating Rohingyas to Bhasan Char continue?

Momen: We have decided to relocate Rohingyas to Bhasan Char as a temporary arrangement as a huge number of Rohingyas are living in a small place [in Cox's Bazar]. We don't want people to suffer. Many people have even died in landslides. That is why we decided to relocate some Rohingyas to Bhasan Char to minimise the risk to their lives.

Locals are dissatisfied with this for multiple reasons. There are some groupings among the Rohingyas. Some Rohingyas have already died in internal violence. That is why we have decided to relocate a few of them to Bhasan Char.

DS: Will all Rohingyas be relocated?

Momen: Normally, around 3,000 people live per square kilometre in Bangladesh. The corresponding numbers are 36 in the US and 15 in Europe. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are there. They said there are very few people in their countries. So, they can take Rohingyas to their country. But there is very limited space in our country. If you can find some space, we can relocate Rohingyas there. We have urged all to take Rohingyas, if they want. But none showed interest. Only Canada said they would take six Rohingyas.

DS: What is the Bangladesh government's plan? Will all Rohingyas be relocated to Bhasan Char or will some be relocated there?

Momen: We cannot answer this in one word right now.

Country shivers as mercury stays low

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bitter cold coupled with fog has been disrupting people's daily lives across the country.

People of low-income group are facing double blow as they have to go out for work amid bone-chilling cold.

The lowest temperature 7.0 degrees Celsius was recorded at Rajarhat of Kurigram and Tentulia of Panchagarh yesterday.

"Mild to moderate cold wave is sweeping over Rangpur division and the regions of Gopalganj, Sitakunda, Feni, Sreemangal, Pabna, Badalgachhi, Jashore, Kumarkhali, Chuadanga, Barishal and Bhola," said a weather bulletin.

"It may continue," said the bulletin of Bangladesh Meteorological Department yesterday.

"Night temperature may rise slightly and day temperature may remain nearly unchanged over the country," said the bulletin.

The Met office forecast for 24 hours was released at 6:00pm yesterday.

"Weather may remain dry over the country. Moderate to thick fog may occur at places between midnight and morning," the bulletin added.

In Lalmonirhat and Kurigram, the sky was covered with dense fog all day yesterday. Vehicles were seen moving with headlights on. Cold-related diseases are spreading fast in the two districts.

Many were seen trying to keep warm by setting straw on fire. People gathered in markets and on footpaths to buy second-hand warm clothes.

"It is very hard to pull rickshaws in the cold. But we have to do it as there is no alternative for us," said Mazdul Islam, a rickshaw-puller of Refugee Colony area in Lalmonirhat town.

Contacted, Kamruzzaman Suzan, Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila parishad chairman, and Uttam Kumar Roy, Sadar upazila nirbahi officer, said they were distributing blankets and other things to the cold-hit poor people.

In Nilphamari, the situation slightly improved yesterday as the sun was visible.

But the local Met official said the temperature might fall at night.

[Our correspondents in Lalmonirhat and Nilphamari contributed to this report]

Covid-19 cases

FROM PAGE 1
recovered, pushing the total number of recoveries to 4,37,527 and the recovery rate is 87.38 percent.

Among the 38 deceased, 30 were men.

Of the deceased, one was below 10, one between 21-30 years old, one between 31-40, four within 41-50, nine within 51-60 and 22 were above 60 years old, added the release.

Pro-AL Blue Panel wins Duta polls uncontested

DU CORRESPONDENT

The pro-Awami League teachers of Blue Panel of Dhaka University won the DU Teachers' Association (Duta) polls without contest, as no other panel submitted nomination form by the stipulated time.

On December 18, the BNP-Jamaat backed white panel teachers announced, in a press conference, that they would not take part in the election and cited covid-19 situation and other reasons behind taking such decision.

Talking to The Daily Star, Prof Zakir Hossain Bhuiyan of marketing department, who was given the charge of conducting the polls, said, "We have published the final list of candidates and only one panel (Blue) submitted their nomination by the final date [yesterday]. I will announce the result tomorrow [today] 4:00pm at University Teachers' Club."

Prof Rahmat Ullah was elected the president while Prof Nizamul Haque Bhuiyan won the general secretary post.

Prof Sabita Rezwana Rahman was elected vice-president; treasurer and joint general secretary posts were won by Prof Akram Hossain and Prof Abdur Rahim.

The ten members' posts were won by Prof Sadeka Halim, Prof AJM Shafiq Alam Bhuiyan, Prof Ishtiaque M Syed, Prof Saiful Islam, Prof M Amzad Ali, Prof Chandra Nath Podder, Prof Abu Shara Shamsur Rouf, Prof Muhammad Abdul Moyeen and Prof Nisar Hossain.

The election to Duta was supposed to be held on December 30 this year, but since no one is contesting for 15 executive posts, all the candidates from Blue panel won uncontested.

Food security still not for all

FROM PAGE 1

income group do not have any food at home.

Food production in Bangladesh has kept its pace with its population growth. Currently, the country produces 3.51 crore tonnes of foodgrains -- rice and wheat in the 2019-20 fiscal year for its 16.76 crore people, according to food ministry data.

The net foodgrains required was 2.36 crore tonnes in the last fiscal year, showed the data.

The BBS conducted the survey to generate evidence and enhance knowledge on the food security situation and socioeconomic characteristics in areas where the urban poor live.

The survey was aimed at helping develop urban targeting criteria for social security programmes. Besides, it will be a baseline evidence of the pre-pandemic situation which can be compared to the post-Covid situation, according to BBS.

The survey showed that the situation was grimmer in Dhaka and Chattogram cities where 9.23 percent of the surveyed households went to bed hungry against 4.84 percent households in other cities.

The survey found that around three percent households did not eat the whole day and night. In Dhaka and Chattogram, it was 3.17 percent.

It found seven percent households consumed fewer meals and nearly 15 percent ate non-preferred foods and 14.48 percent had reduced meal sizes.

"The households tend to adopt negative coping mechanisms to adapt to challenging circumstances, which compromised food security and nutrition... [They] reduced the quality and quantity of food consumed," said the survey.

However, 92 percent of the households were found to be experiencing low levels of food

insecurity.

The BBS survey also found that only six percent urban vulnerable households experienced moderate hunger.

Commenting on the survey, Planning Minister MA Mannan said the survey portrayed the pre-pandemic food security situation and things changed after Covid-19 hit the country.

"I apprehend that the situation took a turn for the worse when the pandemic raged through the country, because unemployment rate rose and people's income fell," he said.

"At the same time, I must say that we found in another recent survey this year that people started to take part in economic activities like they did before the pandemic," said Mannan, citing another BBS survey released in October.

The minister said the challenges can be overcome by further expansion of the social safety net and continued economic development which will create employment opportunities.

FOOD BUDGET AND CONSUMPTION

The survey showed that the urban households spend 51 percent of their total expenditure on food, followed by rent and health care costs which account for over 26 percent.

Poor households in Dhaka and Chattogram report per capita total monthly expenditure of Tk 4,042, which is the highest among the cities. And around 67 percent of the total surveyed households had no savings, it said.

It found that rice was consumed in the greatest quantity as a person in a household ate almost 275 grams of rice a day. After rice, they consumed vegetables with a person eating 91.27 grams a day.

It said half of the households consumed chicken once a week and

daily consumption of chicken by a person was as low as 41 grams. Households in other cities had much less chicken.

Only 35 percent ate fruits.

Zahid Hussain, former lead economist at the World Bank, thinks the survey provides useful information on the standard of living and vulnerability of poor urban households in Dhaka and Chattogram.

"Although the average urban household was above the national upper poverty line in December 2019, it was only barely so," he told The Daily Star.

"Given the context, it is not difficult to understand why a shock such as the one caused by Covid-19 would affect urban households so hard."

Nearly 75 percent of the poor households are likely to have suffered an immediate income shock due to the lockdown as households dependent on wage employment, business and self-employment had no protection, he added.

"With no savings to draw from for a vast majority of the urban population... many had to cut expenditures on food and migrate back to their rural roots," he added.

Eight dead in Philippine floods as thousands flee homes

AFP, Manila

Nearly 10,000 people were evacuated from their homes in the northeastern Philippines as heavy rain across the country left at least eight people dead, authorities said yesterday.

The storm -- which has inundated villages and destroyed scores of houses in recent days -- is the latest to batter the disaster-prone archipelago.