

BANGLADESH UPDATE



1,318
New cases in 24hrs



5,03,501
Total cases



7,329
Deaths



4,41,929
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE



1,717,566
Deaths



78,104,605
Total cases

Cold wave likely to continue

STAR REPORT

Public sufferings caused by the ongoing cold spell remains unabated in many districts, especially in northern region.

Farmers are struggling to protect the crops in the cold-hit areas as crops in some areas have been affected due to biting cold.

The lowest temperature was recorded at 7.1 degree Celsius at Tentulia in Panchagarh yesterday.

"Mild cold wave is sweeping over the regions of Gopalganj, Cumilla, Tentulia, Rajarhat and Chuadanga," read a weather bulletin.

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

"Night and day temperature may remain nearly unchanged over the country," it added.

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 over the river basins of the country and light to moderate fog may occur at places elsewhere over the country during midnight to morning," it added.

The bulletin forecast that the weather may see little change in the

next 72 hours.

Our correspondents from different districts reported on the cold wave.

Blight disease are spreading in potato fields due to severe cold. Besides, Boro seedlings and peeper plants have also been damaged due to cold in some areas in Nilphamari.

Shamim Hossain Babu, a farmer of Uttor Durakuti village in Kishoreganj, said, "I have cultivated potato in 22 bighas of land. Of these, potato of 15 decimal lands have already been attacked by disease.

"Now, I have to use insecticides, deploy guards round the clock and take other initiative to protect my potato. It will increase my production cost."

Many feared that if cold spell continued for longer period, more crops will be damaged.

Contacted, Obaidur Rahman, deputy director of Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) in Nilphamari, said they have suggested farmers to use insecticides to protect crops.

He, however, claimed that he does not have any information of damaging crops due to cold.

Our Nilphamari correspondent contributed to this report.



Members of Bangladesh Chhatra Adhikar Parishad block Paltan intersection in the capital yesterday protesting what they say is the impunity for the attackers of their leaders at Ducusu Bhaban of Dhaka University a year ago. Movement of traffic was disrupted in the area for about half an hour.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Don't fall in trap, use legal ways

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Meanwhile, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, during her visit to Italy in February this year, requested Italy to open the labour market for Bangladesh.

Enrico said, "We considered opening the labour market in response to Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's request. It is also because there is now a Standard Operating Procedure between Bangladesh and European Union for the repatriation of undocumented migrants."

He said seasonal workers' visas range from three months to nine months, while non-seasonal ones are for long term residence, adding that his government has announced the recruitment 30,000 seasonal workers for now.

The Italian ambassador however said the number of Bangladeshis who can be recruited cannot be predicted since quotas are open for workers of other nationalities as well.

The deadline for the employers to apply for the foreign workers from 30 countries is December 31.

RECRUITMENT PROCEDURE
Ambassador Enrico Nunziata ruled out the involvement of middlemen or agents in the recruitment process.

There is already a big Bangladeshi community in Italy, familiar with the employers. Here, familiarity and trustworthiness are important, he added.

Once the employer gets passports and other details of the aspirant migrants, they apply to the provincial one-stop service centre (involving departments of labour, interior and police) for foreign workers.

Once work permit is issued against the candidate, it is put online and is accessible by the Italian embassies concerned and is notified to the employer. The employer then notifies the jobseeker, who then has to apply

to VFS Italy -- the Italian visa service provider.

All the taxes and fees for the work permits are provided by the employers.

The only fee the jobseekers need to pay is the cost of the VFS service, which is 30 Euros, and the visa fee, which is 80 euros for short term visas up to 90 days and 116 Euros for long term visas, Enrico explains.

"We check if the information in the application matches with that of the work permit and then print it," he said.

He also warned that anyone claiming to arrange visas and collects money is a fraud.

An official at the Bangladesh's Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment said there is information that middlemen are offering Italian visas in exchange for hefty sums. The ministry also asked the jobseekers not to pay any money to these middlemen.

When workers pay hefty sums, they tend not to return but earn more in illegal ways. They think they can't obtain visas again, which is not right, said Ambassador Enrico.

"If they return home on time, they can go again. It's also good that after three to six months they can come, visit family and go back to Italy again," he said.

FAMILY REUNIFICATION

The Italian ambassador said while working as a seasonal worker, one could also be eligible in the future for indefinite work permit finding employers for a permanent job. More importantly, when one has a regular position in Italy, they can bring other family members and after 10 years of regular work and income, they can become Italian citizens.

Family reunification is a way through which the Bangladeshi community in Italy has been increasing every year. In 2013, there was 111,223 Bangladeshis.

That increased to 147,872 in 2019.

Enrico Nunziata said since his joining the Italian Embassy in Dhaka in January 2019, he cleared a lot of backlog of visa applications, including the family reunification visas.

BE PATIENT FOR RE-ENTRY VISAS
Just before or during the pandemic, many Bangladeshis had come here, but their resident permits got expired or lost. So, they applied for re-entry visas.

Between August and October, more than 2,000 Bangladeshis applied for re-entry visas that created immense pressure on the embassy. Though other embassies worked from home, officials of the Italian embassy had to work full-fledged in the office.

The challenge is that the Italian competent police headquarters (Questure) authorisation is required for issuing such visas, that it does after verification of the application. This is requiring a longer time since Italy is also battling the Covid-19 pandemic with lockdowns.

Some police headquarters, located in cities where the Bangladeshi community is larger and which receive higher requests of re-entries, take more time to respond compared to others. This is why some re-entry visas are issued before others. By December, the Italian embassy was able to issue around 1,500 re-entry visas.

"When we are working hard day and night, some applicants were agitating. This is so unfortunate," Enrico said, adding that the embassy is eager to clear the backlog and help the applicants, who were urged to be patient.

"Migration from Bangladesh to Italy forms a very important pillar of bilateral relationships. But we encourage legal pathways. If there are trends of people overstaying, the new opportunity may be wasted," he said.

US reinstates Sudan's sovereign immunity over past terror attacks

AFP, Washington

US lawmakers on Monday backed legislation granting Sudan legal immunity for past militant attacks, a final step in a historic deal removing Khartoum from Washington's blacklist of state sponsors of terrorism.

The text restores Sudan's sovereign immunity with the exception of litigation already pending in US federal courts related to the September 11, 2001 attacks, and earmarks hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to Khartoum.

The legislation was part of the massive omnibus bill to fund the government for the coming year, which is also due to include a new aid package to help millions of Americans and businesses hit hard by the pandemic.

Sudan was removed from the US

state sponsors of terrorism blacklist a week ago, less than two months after the Arab nation pledged to normalize ties with Israel.

The move also promises aid, debt relief and investment to a country going through a rocky political transition and struggling under a severe economic crisis exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Sudan will receive \$700 million in assistance funds and an additional \$120 million toward the repayment of its debt to the International Monetary Fund.

As part of a deal, Sudan agreed to pay \$335 million to compensate survivors and victims' families from the 1998 al-Qaeda twin attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and a 2000 attack by the jihadist group on the USS Cole off Yemen's coast.

Papul, family made

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"Jesmin's 38 bank accounts and FDRs were directly and indirectly controlled by Papul who transferred crores of taka to different bank accounts," the CID official told The Daily Star.

He also said they are investigating whether Papul's wife Selina Islam, also a lawmaker, had any involvement in it.

Al-Amin suspected that the accused may have more illegally amassed wealth. The prime accused, Papul, could possess illegal assets outside the country. Information regarding this will be obtained from financial intelligence units of foreign countries through mutual legal assistance requests.

"We will probe further to trace the money he [Papul] laundered abroad. We may seek court order for freezing his accounts and confiscating his properties," he added.

According to the case statement, Papul in his wealth statement mentioned that he has wealth worth Tk 41.07 crore, while his wife Selina claimed she has wealth worth Tk 64.51 crore and their daughter Wafa Tk 7.77 crore.

In her wealth statement, Papul's sister-in-law Jesmin said she possesses wealth worth Tk 30 lakh. However, the CID probe found that she has transacted Tk 164 crore through 38 bank accounts and FDRs against her name or her organisation's name.

Papul was arrested in Kuwait in early June and is now behind bars. He faces trial on the charges of human trafficking and money laundering.

He has been accused of taking up to 3,000 Kuwaiti dinars (around Tk 8 lakh) each from migrant workers, mostly Bangladeshis, for sending them to Kuwait.

The Kuwaiti authorities shut down a big recruitment company jointly owned by Papul and a Kuwaiti citizen.

On July 7, Kuwait-returnee Abdul Alim from Naogaon filed a human trafficking case against Papul with Motijheel Police Station.

Alim said he paid Job Bank International Tk 7 lakh for a job in Kuwait with a monthly salary of Tk 35,000. Upon his arrival in Kuwait, he was given a job in a cleaning company owned by Papul. Alim was forced to work 16 hours a day and got Tk 22,000-27,000 a month.

Another Kuwait-returnee, Rubel Haq, alleged that he paid Tk 5 lakh to the same agency for a job in the Middle East country. But when he arrived there, he was not given the promised job. Instead, he along with 10 other Bangladeshis was sent back by the Kuwaiti authorities for not having legal documents.

Based on the allegations, the CID

arrested Job Bank International Manager Golam Mostafa who later confessed before a court that following instructions from Papul and Badrul, he took Tk 5 to 7 lakh each from many with promises of jobs in Kuwait. He then transferred the money to the two brothers.

The Anti-Corruption Commission on November 11 filed a case against Papul, his wife, daughter and sister-in-law for laundering Tk 148 crore.

HC ORDER
The High Court yesterday ordered Papul's wife Selina and daughter Wafa to surrender before the lower court concerned by December 28 in the Tk 148.41 crore laundering case.

The court gave the order after virtually hearing a petition filed by the two for including the word "vacation" in its earlier order.

Khurshid Alam Khan, counsel for the ACC, told this newspaper that the HC on December 10 rejected a bail petition filed by the two and ordered them to surrender before the court of metropolitan sessions judge in Dhaka.

The accused went to the court concerned on December 20 to surrender in line with the HC directive. But it did not accept their surrender as the HC order mentioned that they have to surrender to the court of metropolitan sessions judge, not to a vacation court, he said.

Selina and Wafa later submitted a petition to the HC for including the word "vacation" in its order, mentioned the lawyer.

The lower courts across the country are on 15-day annual vacation from December 17, added Khurshid.

In the case statement, the ACC said Papul deposited Tk 148.41 crore to different bank accounts of his sister-in-law Jesmin. Selina and Wafa also transferred their ill-gotten money to Jesmin's accounts.

The ACC also brought charges of illegally accumulating Tk 2.31 crore against the main accused, Jesmin.

The allegations surfaced after Kuwaiti newspapers reported in February that Papul was running a human trafficking racket in that country. The reports said the two Bangladeshi lawmakers and their daughter held key positions in three major companies that sent over 20,000 Bangladeshi workers to Kuwait in exchange for an amount believed to be at least Tk 1,391.6 crore.

On November 26, Selina, Wafa and Jesmin filed two separate petitions with the HC seeking anticipatory bail in the case.

In the petitions, they said the case was filed against them with malafide intention to harass them.

Police hotlines flooded with complaints

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The PCSW officials first tried to calm her down, saying suicide could not be a solution and that she needed to be strong to ensure punishment of the criminals.

Following an hour-long counselling, the victim started providing information and the hacker was eventually arrested, according to a PCSW official.

Shakila Yeasmin Suchana, an assistant superintendent of police at the PCSW wing, told The Daily Star on December 7 that they often receive such desperate calls.

"We have to calm them down with proper counselling over phone or on Facebook messenger before taking action against the criminals," she added.

Since the special wing, consisting of only the female members of police, was launched on November 16, PCSW has received around 4,567 complaints on its hotline number -- 01320-000888 -- or its Facebook page.

Of the complaints, 1,096 were for fake ID, 638 for ID hack, 367 for blackmailing, 435 for mobile harassment and 356 for sending nude content, according to the wing's database.

Mir Abu Touhid, assistant inspector general at the Police Headquarters, said they act promptly whenever any complaints reach the wing.

Of the complaints, around 1,344 have been addressed till December 7, he added.

COMPLAINTS MULTIPLYING
Just nine months back in March this year, the Cyber Police Centre of Criminal Investigation Department (CID) launched a Facebook page to create awareness and receive complaints of cybercrime victims. It can also be reached over the phone by dialling 01320-010148.

"When we launched the page, we used to receive around 50 to 100 complaints daily," said Mohammad Mahmudul Islam Talukder, additional police superintendent at the Cyber Police Centre.

"But it started rising rapidly soon after as awareness among the victims grew about where to file complaints. Now the Cyber Police Centre is receiving around 1,500 complaints

daily from different areas of the country and the number is rising every day," he said.

The cell received around 700 to 800 complaints daily in September.

The official observed the lack of digital knowledge and slack vigilance from the authorities on the use of Facebook had worsened the situation. Many users get tricked, harassed and blackmailed by fake social media account holders and are left socially humiliated.

The Cyber Police Centre received around 7,020 complaints on Facebook and 8,486 complaints over phone from September 1 to November 18 this year, according to its database.

Majority of the victims are aged 14-30.

CID has completed investigation of around 197 cases in two years till November of this year and around 179 cases are under investigation.

ONLINE APPS UNDER SURVEILLANCE

Md Kamrul Ahsan, additional DIG of CID Cyber Police, told this newspaper recently that they have marked out some online applications behind sexual harassment.

Nude contents are being aired in these apps, instigating the youth to commit offences like sexual harassment, he said.

"We have prepared a list of around 100 such online applications, which are easy to download for free. We will write to BTRC soon to ban these online social media apps," the official added.

He said some neighbouring countries have already started taking action against this type of app.

In a recent move, India has taken off Likee from Google Play and App Store and also suspended the operation of Bigo app, according to media reports.

CRIME ZONE

The CID has marked out some districts as cybercrime zones after analysing the 7,020 complaints on Facebook and 8,486 complaints over phone from September 1 to November 18 of this year.

These complaints include digital fraud, digital question paper leak, dollar purchase, pornography and mobile financial account fraud, said SM Ashraf Alam, special superintendent (investigation and operation) of CID

Not for those

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According to them, a teacher or government official in the capital get 50 to 60 percent of their basic as house rent, and those working in metropolitan cities get 40 to 60 percent. Those working outside the capital and metropolitan cities get 35 to 45 percent.

At the meeting, the PM also directed all universities to form a "master plan" so that there are no unplanned constructions of building or infrastructure on the campuses.

She added that "rate schedules" prepared by the executing agencies must get approval from the finance ministry before the project gets government approval.

The Planning Commission must scrutinise whether the rate schedule was approved by the finance ministry, Ashadul quoted the PM as saying.

Officials said that on many occasions executing agencies bring changes in the rate schedule and that causes an increase in the project cost.

Ashadul said the finance ministry has already issued a circular in this regard to effectively address the issue of rate schedules and the Cabinet Division is also taking due measures.

Oxygen supply

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saving lives of critical coronavirus patients, who grasp for oxygen.

With cylinders, a patient can be given oxygen at the maximum rate of six litres per minute. Whereas, a central oxygen supply, which can provide much more oxygen in an uninterrupted manner, depends on liquid oxygen.

"The repair work is underway at our Ruppang plant. We are in the meantime importing oxygen from India ... and supplying it to the hospitals," Saika Majed, general manager of Linde Bangladesh Limited, told The Daily Star, adding that the import began on December 14.

She said they were bringing in around 60-80 tonnes of oxygen every day and would continue to do so until the plant resumed operation.

Besides, around 20 tonnes are being supplied to the hospitals from Linde's another plant in Chattogram, she said, adding, "We are hopeful that there will be no shortage of medical oxygen."

Officials of the Directorate General of Health Services said around 100 tonnes of oxygen are needed every day to ensure uninterrupted supply at the government hospitals and 90 percent of the supply comes from Linde Bangladesh. The rest is supplied by Spectra Oxygen Limited, they said.

"After the production stopped, the government acted quickly and ensured a smooth supply. Otherwise, the situation could have turned grave," said DGHS Director (hospital) Farid Uddin Mia.

Soon after the plant went out of order, the Prime Minister's Office, the health, home and foreign ministries, the NBR and other ministries and departments concerned were prompt in solving the crisis, he said.

"Now tankers loaded with liquid oxygen directly come to Bangladesh [from India] through Benapole border," he added.

Wishing not to be named, a DGHS official, however, said there were still some concerns. "The situation can turn bad if the supply gets disrupted somehow," he said.

The World Health Organisation says 15-20 percent of Covid-19 patients require hospitalisation and oxygen support, with around 15 percent of cases showing severe symptoms and five percent requiring intensive care.

DGHS officials said the number of critical Covid-19 patients seeking oxygen support at hospitals was increasing as winter set in.

On December 19, some 301 people were admitted to ICUs across the country, shows DGHS data. There are a total of 568 dedicated ICU beds for Covid-19 patients.

In the hospitals in Dhaka, 211 of the 286 ICU beds were occupied that day, the data shows.

Currently, 17 hospitals -- eight public and nine private -- are offering ICU facilities in Dhaka.

Dr Mushtaq Hussain, consultant of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), said the rise in the number of critical patients and a lack of intensive care facilities in hospitals in other districts were putting strain on the hospitals with ICUs in Dhaka.

He said patients from other districts rushed to Dhaka for many other reasons.

"It might be the case that a district has one hospital with ICU facilities, but it lacks manpower to run the ICUs or the machines do not function properly," he added.

17 more die

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Of the 17 deceased, 11 were males.

Two were aged between 41 and 50, four between 51 and 60, and 11 were above 60 years, added the release.

Govt taking time

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bound Bangladeshi migrant workers amid the flight suspension, Mohibul Haque said, "We have contacts with the Saudi government. Preference will be given to those who were waiting to return to Saudi Arabia after buying tickets. There is nothing to worry about."

UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock on December 20 warned that the new mutant strain of the coronavirus is "out of control" and suggested parts of England will be stuck in the new highest tier of restrictions until a vaccine is rolled out.