

BANGLADESH
UPDATE



1,235
New cases in 24hrs



5,12,496
Total cases



7,531
Deaths



4,56,070
Recoveries

GLOBAL
UPDATE



1,804,612
Deaths



82,712,325
Total cases

UNIFORM ADMISSION TEST

4 engineering univs to hold one exam

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Four public engineering universities have decided in principle to form a cluster and hold a uniform admission test.

But opinion seems to be divided on when and where the exam would be held.

Top officials of universities at a virtual meeting with the University Grants Commission (UGC) yesterday said the academic councils at their respective universities had agreed to join the uniform admission test titled “Central Admission Test”.

Representatives of the UGC, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet), Chattogram University of Engineering and Technology, Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology and Khulna University of Engineering and Technology, attended the meeting.

After the meeting, a vice chancellor told The Daily Star that Buet authorities proposed that their representative would always be chairman of the admission committee and the exams be held at Buet only.

But officials from the three other universities said that representatives of the four universities should take turns to be the chairman and that exams should be held at each of the universities.

The UGC released a statement after the meeting saying, “There is a difference of opinion on formation

of the admission test committee and exam centre.”

Contacted, UGC Member Muhammed Alamgir, who moderated the meeting, said, “We have asked the three universities to clearly state their opinion to the UGC, so that concrete decisions can be made regarding the formation of a cluster.”

Buet officials wrote to the UGC in November stating their interest in joining a cluster of engineering universities to hold the admission test.

Dhaka University, Rajshahi University, Jahangirnagar University and Chattogram University decided to opt out of the cluster.

On December 19, VCs of 19 public universities decided that there will be three exams under the new system -- one each for science, humanities and business studies students -- based on the curriculum of grade-XI and -XII.

The new method of university admission has been in discussion since 2010. It is aimed at relieving admission seekers of the hassles of travelling to different universities in various parts of the country just to be able to sit for the tests every admission season.

On January 23 this year, the UGC announced that universities would hold a uniform admission test in the 2020-2021 academic year.

Alamgir said seven agricultural universities will form a separate cluster to hold the uniform admission test.



A worker standing on the cab of a moving pickup while at least five others are sitting on the household items on its back. None of them seem to be bothered by the risks involved. The photo was taken in Kamalapur area in the capital yesterday.

PHOTO:
ANISUR RAHMAN

Vulnerability exposed

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dollars, is still going strong.

Very recently, a new strain of the novel coronavirus believed to be “more transmissible” has emerged in the United Kingdom, forcing European countries to shut down borders and many other countries to suspend air communications with the UK.

When the pandemic hit the country in March, a widespread shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) and substandard PPE came to light.

This caused loss of confidence among frontline healthcare professionals. Besides, around a dozen doctors were issued show-cause notices for writing about the substandard PPEs on their social media accounts.

“At the beginning, [the government] tried to keep the issue of fake [substandard] PPE secret.... there was no step to address it,” Prof Dr Ehteshamul Haque Chowdhury Dulal, general secretary of Bangladesh Medical Association, told The Daily Star.

He said 112 doctors have died of coronavirus, as of December 28.

“But the doctors and other healthcare professionals did not get due recognition despite their valiant efforts in fighting the pandemic.”

He said the casualty among the doctors was more due to the lack of a triage system in the hospitals for systematic prioritising of patients’ treatment according to how urgently they need care.

“The entire Covid-19 planning was driven by the bureaucrats and the chaos is mainly for that reason,” the BMA general secretary said.

He also lamented that family members of only one deceased doctor has been compensated so far.

INADEQUATE TESTING AND SCAMS
For a long time, since the Chinese virus started shaking the world, the government kept the testing facility limited to the IEDCR lab only. It was against the “test, test and test” policy suggested by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Hospitals also started refusing to treat even general patients without a Covid-19 negative certificate. It led to untold sufferings of people seeking medical attention and hundreds of such patients died without getting treatment.

Sixty-three-old Monowara Begum was one such patient who died in an ambulance on June 2 after six hospitals in Sylhet refused to treat her fearing she had Covid-19. Her tragic death made headlines.

Despite executive orders to treat each and every patient and a June 15 High Court ruling that said such deaths will be termed as “deaths due to negligence”, the situation did not change until testing was expanded across the country.

On March 29, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) announced the expansion of Covid-19 facilities and now there are 114 RT-PCR, 24 gene-expert, and 29 rapid antigen-based test labs across the country.

When the number of daily tests was rising, the health ministry surprisingly imposed fees for Covid-19 tests from June 29.

Quoting experts, the Lancet journal wrote on August 29 that the Bangladesh government’s approach to testing and surveillance, including charging patients a fee, is hampering the Covid-19 response.

“Since the beginning, the government’s strategy against Covid-19 was suicidal, Prof Ridwanur said. “From screening at the ports, and quarantine to testing and contact tracing -- all were

in name only.”

The number of daily tests has remained stagnant at around 12,000 despite all the labs having a combined capacity to run more than 30,000 tests a day, he added.

Then there were allegations of fake tests with around 40,000 fake Covid-19 certificates given out by Regent Hospitals Ltd and the GKG Ltd in early July.

Even after months went by, the government is yet to set up much-needed central oxygen supply systems in most district hospitals despite repeated call from the National Technical Committee (NTAC) on Covid-19.

“If there were uninterrupted oxygen supplies in hospitals, many lives could have been saved,” Prof Nazrul Islam, member of the NTAC, told The Daily Star.

Besides, uneven distribution of ICUs across the country remained a major concern in treating critical and elderly Covid-19 patients.

Parallel to lax management of public hospitals, the government had little control over private hospitals in case of treatment expenditure.

While experts see the government’s failure from different aspects, Prof Flora, now additional director general (Planning) of the DGHS, disagreed.

“The Covid-19 was an unknown challenge for the entire world. We had limitations. Despite this, the transmission had never spread widely. From nothing, we have now 167 Covid-19 testing labs. These are our big successes,” Prof Flora told The Daily Star on Monday.

THE CORRUPTION GAP

The government’s response to the coronavirus outbreak has been plagued by wrong decisions, delayed actions, and muddled thinking from the very first day even though it got three months’ time to take preparation.

Since the beginning, the health minister and his officials repeatedly said they were fully prepared to handle Covid-19 transmission, which, according to the experts, gave a “wrong message to the people.”

Health Minister Zahid Maleque on August 15 said the Covid-19 virus will leave the country on its own. “Whether the vaccine comes or not, coronavirus will leave the country.”

Before this, Minister of Road Transport and Bridges Obaidul Quader had gone as far as to say: “We are stronger than the corona.”

While these comments went viral on mainstream and social media and drew flak, a clear lack of coordination among government organisations everywhere also surfaced every day.

The authorities lagged behind in taking decisions like closing airports, sending returning expatriate workers to compulsory quarantine, and imposing a total shutdown.

Internal feuds among different government entities caused delays for the authorities in preparing the emergency response plan on Covid-19, say experts.

Initially, the IEDCR, the government’s disease control agency, was dealing with the pandemic, but then a feud between the high-ups of IEDCR and DGHS delayed the finalisation of the emergency response plan.

Then came the quarantine fiasco. More than two lakh people entered Bangladesh since March when the virus was spreading across the world, prompting countries to shut their borders.

But as the Bangladeshi expatriates started coming in, the government

allowed them to go home without putting them into mandatory quarantine.

After many countries resumed air communications, hundreds of thousands of expatriate workers fell into a dire situation having no testing certification support for them.

On March 23, the government announced a shutdown effective from March 26, but kept public transport running. As a result, tens of thousands of people left Dhaka having been exposed to the virus.

The government then extended the shutdown in phases, which had a substantial impact on the country’s economy.

For the first few months, cases were restricted to Dhaka and cities like Narayanganj and Gazipur. But there was no mechanism to control the exodus of the people leaving Dhaka city centring on Eid-ul-Azha in July-August.

This, according to experts, resulted in the spread of the virus across the country. Then came the influx of hundreds of thousands of garment workers returning to Dhaka with no safety guidelines followed.

“When China was struggling, the IEDCR said, ‘we are prepared.’ But they were not supposed to say it as a research organisation. In the middle [of 2020], the government got better prepared following pressure from the media and others,” Dr Ehteshamul said.

Prof Ridwanur said different organisations of the government did not work as a team while in Prof Flora’s view, “It was a new experience for them. But now they are well-prepared.”

Asked about any issue the government failed to address, Prof Flora said, “We have not been able to engage the community properly.”

THE CORRUPTION AND THE STEPS

In response to widespread criticism over corruption, the government removed some top officials from DGHS, including its director general Prof Dr Abul Kalam Azad.

“Removal of the DG was only an eyewash; no step was taken against others involved. Corruption involving hundreds of crores is not possible for the directorate only. We have seen the then secretary promoted,” Dr Ehteshamul said, adding, “The doctors have been kept under pressure on the other hand.”

The Covid-19 emergency has unfolded how futile the Infectious Disease Prevention and Control Act 2018 is. The act gave the lead role to the DGHS boss; in reality, its exercise was impossible due to the existing administrative practice of the government.

Dr Abdul Hamid, a professor of health economics at Dhaka University told this correspondent, “We never analyse the root cause when the state takes steps against anything... Apparently we can see the same this time. That Sabrina, this Shahed -- no one is any de-linked person. They have forward and backward links. If we cannot find those links, we cannot be successful in eradicating corruption.”

In addition to the Tk 798 crore Covid-19-related expense fund, the health ministry has Tk 100 crore for Covid-19 related expenses in Covid-19 hospitals in Dhaka and across the country.

In FY2020-21, the government has a block allocation for the health sector worth Tk 10,000 crore.

Besides, there is \$500 million pledge from the World Bank, for which a direct purchase plan is awaiting Ecne approval. It will be used mainly for the cost of Covid-19 vaccination.

FEDERATION CUP FOOTBALL

Four former champions advance

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The quarterfinal line-up for the Walton Federation Cup was completed yesterday, with four former champions advanced into the knockout stages after the final round of group-stage matches at the Bangabandhu National Stadium.

11-time champions Abahani defeated three-time champions Muktijoddha Sangsad 2-1 to emerge as champions of Group D with six points from two outings. The win also saw their archrivals Mohammedan SC advance with three points as the runners up of the group.

Abahani took the momentum from a morale-boosting 3-0 win over Mohammedan into match against Muktijoddha Sangsad, dominating them throughout 90 minutes and winning 2-1. But the margin of victory would have been more emphatic had captain Nabib Newaj Jibon not squandered a couple of scoring opportunities.

Afghanistan defender Masih Saighani netted his second in as many games for Abahani, providing a 30-minute lead from a free-kick, before Jibon drove wide twice from close range. Saighani came close to doubling the lead but was well denied by goalkeeper Nurul Karim in stoppage time.

After resumption, Abahani pressed to widen the margin and Haiti’s Kerven Fils Belfort nodded home a corner from Jibon in the 69th minute. Muktijoddha Sangsad pulled one back through substitute Rahit Sarkar three minutes from time, but it proved to be only a consolation goal.

In the day’s second match, Sheikh Russel edged Sheikh Jamal 3-2 to emerge as Group A champions with six points. Sheikh Jamal, despite being equal on one point with Bangladesh Police, moved into the last eight from the same group by virtue of scoring more goals.

It took Sheikh Russel just six minutes to get the lead, a header from Tajik defender Siyovush Asrorov bulging the net before Nigeria’s Obi Moneke doubled the lead in the 39th minute.

After the break, Sheikh Jamal hit back through Solomon King, who converted a spot-kick in the 49th minute. But Sheikh Russel restored their two-goal cushion ten minutes later as substitute Tolkish tapped home. Sheikh Jamal were in danger of being eliminated from the tournament at that point, but King scored again from a penalty to better Bangladesh Police and ensure a quarterfinal berth for his side.

Quarterfinal Line-up:

- Dec 1: Sheikh Russel vs Chattogram Abahani
- Dec 2: Saif vs Mohammedan
- Dec 3: Bashundhara Kings vs Sheikh Jamal
- Dec 4: Abahani vs Uttar Baridhara

3 Jubo League men held for assaulting doctor, nurse

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Faridpur

Police yesterday arrested three Jubo League activists in Nagarkanda upazila for assaulting a doctor, nurse and an office assistant during the ongoing measles-rubella vaccination programme.

Arrestees Alamin Mia, 45, Anwar Hossain, 47, and Rubel Mia, 38, are activists of the upazila unit Jubo League.

Sources said when a woman took her daughter for vaccination to the Nagarkanda Upazila Health Complex around noon yesterday, the on-duty nurse asked her to stand in the queue as many were waiting.

The woman became angry and called in her brother Alamin over the phone, who went there with Anwar and Rubel and 10-12 others and assaulted nurse Rekha Khanam.

Jyotirmoy Chowdhury, medical officer of the health complex, tried to stop the attackers but he too was beaten up.

Ekhas Hossain, office assistant of the complex, was also assaulted as he was trying to record footage of the incident on his mobile phone, the medical officer told The Daily Star.

On information, police went to the spot and arrested the trio but others managed to flee, he added.

Sheikh Md Sohel Rana, officer-in-charge of Nagarkanda Police Station, said a case was filed against them.

4 killed as microbus gas cylinder explodes after crash

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

Four persons, including a five-year-old child, were killed in an accident on Sylhet-Zakiganj road in Sylhet’s Golapganj upazila early yesterday.

The incident happened as the gas cylinder of a CNG-run microbus exploded after the vehicle hit a goods-laden truck.

The dead are Rajon Ahmed, 22, and microbus driver Sunam Ahmed, 26, of Sylhet’s Beanibazar upazila; Marjan Ahmed, of the district’s Kanaighat upazila; and Mehedy Hasan, 5, of Sylhet’s Golapganj upazila.

Mehedy was a road-side slum dweller whereas rest of the three were passengers of the microbus.

Harun-ur-Rashid Chowdhury, officer-in-charge of Golapganj Police Station, said, “The microbus hit

the moving truck from behind in Hetimganj area around 5:30am. The microbus soon caught fire after its cylinder exploded, leaving three passengers dead on the spot.”

On information, fire fighters rushed to the spot, doused the fire, rescued four injured passengers of the microbus and sent them to Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital.

Quoting the child’s relatives, the OC said, hearing the sound of road accident, he came out of the slum after which the microbus’s gas cylinder exploded and a piece of the gas cylinder hit Mehedy, leaving him critically injured.”

He succumbed to his injuries on the way to the hospital, the police officer said.

Graft rules forest dept

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Officials at the forest range offices also took away 20 to 25 percent of the funds before giving it to the beat offices that further embezzled 20 to 30 percent of the remaining funds.

Officials at the range and beat offices later divided the money among themselves and a section of local journalists.

The survey was done between January 2019 and November 2020.

It collected data on hill forests, sal forests, mangrove forests, and mangroves afforestation initiatives in 10 districts.

TIB also collected data from the forest department’s 60 offices, including its headquarters in Dhaka. The researchers interviewed 130 key informants, held six group discussions, and analysed different documents, including survey reports and relevant laws.

The report said between Tk 1 crore and Tk 3 crore were spent by officials hoping to be the chief conservator of forests.

Likewise, Tk 20 to 25 lakh was exchanged illegally for the post of forest conservator, Tk 10 lakh to Tk 1 crore for divisional forest officer, Tk 1 to 1.5 crore for project director, and Tk 1 to 5 lakh for forest conservator.

The money went to policymakers in the ministry, high officials and a section of other employees, it said.

A FRACTION OF GRABBED FOREST RECLAIMED IN FIVE YEARS

The TIB report said in the last five years, the forest department could reclaim about 8,792 of about 2.87 lakh acres of grabbed forest lands.

The department did not make any effort to demolish illegal structures or reclaim lands if the defaulters belonged to influential quarters in Gazipur, Tangail, Mymensingh and Cox’s Bazar, the report said.

TIB recommended determining government forest areas based on the Cadastral Survey (CS) record. Besides, the government should develop an authentic database of grabbed forest lands and take proper steps to reclaim those, it said.

The report said about 1.60 lakh

FORESTLAND IN PERIL

» 2.87 lakh acres of forestland grabbed until Dec 2019

» Forest dept reclaimed only 8,792 acres in last 5 years

» 1.60 lakh acres of forestland allocated to different forces, BFID, govt and private organisations

» 4.32 lakh acres or 9% of total forest area deforested between 2001 and 2019

SOURCE: TIB REPORT, GLOBAL FOREST WATCH

acres of forest areas were given to different state forces and public and private organisations as of September this year.

Of those, 58.62 percent was given to different state forces and law enforcement agencies, 26.89 percent to the Bank and Financial Institutions Division, and 14.49 percent to other public and private organisations.

Although forest conservation is the key responsibility of the forest department, there have been specific instances of its failure in doing so, said the report.

It didn’t object to setting up of the coal-based power plant in Rampal near the Sundarbans although the environment department raised concerns, it added.

The department declared different reserve forests as wildlife sanctuaries and national parks without following relevant laws or taking opinion of people who depend on the forests for livelihood.

TIB Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman said the picture of the forest department was frustrating.

On occasions, it avoided responsibility by not taking any step while in some cases there were instances of collusion, he added.

Corruption has been “institutionalised” here as “the protector turned into the predator”, he said.

Britain first to approve

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seen as essential for mass immunisations in the developing world as well as in Britain, but does not eliminate questions about trial data that make it unlikely to be approved so rapidly in the European Union or the United States.

“The NHS (National Health Service) will be able to deliver these shots into people’s arms at the speed at which it can be manufactured,” Health Secretary Matt Hancock told Sky News.

“I am also now, with this approval this morning, highly confident that we can get enough vulnerable people vaccinated by the spring that we can now see our route out of this pandemic.”

Johnson called the approval a “triumph for British science”.

Hancock said hundreds of

thousands of doses would be available to administer next week in Britain, which is already rolling out a vaccine developed by Pfizer of the United States and BioNTech of Germany.

The Oxford vaccine has been found in trials to be less effective than the Pfizer/BioNTech shot but, crucially for countries with more basic health infrastructure, can be stored and transported under normal refrigeration, rather than supercooled to -70 degrees Celsius (-94 Fahrenheit).

INDIA INTERESTED

India is keen to start administering the new shot next month; Serum Institute of India (SII), the world’s biggest producer of vaccines, has already made about 50 million doses. Chile is also interested.

SII has already applied for regulatory approval with the Drug Controller

General of India.

SII chief executive Adar Poonawalla had earlier said the vaccine candidate could get approval by next week in India and might be rolled out for the masses in January. “The company is ramping up capacity every week,” he said.

Britain has set itself apart from other Western countries with its fast-track approach to vaccinations, having green-lighted the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine weeks before the EU’s European Medicines Authority (EMA) did so.

A UK government advisory body yesterday recommended a change of course by giving as many people as possible a first dose of coronavirus vaccine right away, rather than giving the second, booster shot within the shortest period of time.

Uncertainty has swirled over the

most effective dosing pattern for the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine since it released data last month showing a 90% success rate for a half-dose followed by a full dose, but only 62% - still usually more than enough for regulators - for two full doses.

The more successful outcome emerged, by accident, in a much smaller number of participants, all under 55, and AstraZeneca is carrying out more tests to see if that rate holds up in a bigger set of volunteers.

AstraZeneca did not specify which regimen had been approved yesterday.

The EMA says it has not yet received full data on the AstraZeneca vaccine and is unlikely to be able to approve it next month. A decision from the US regulator is also not imminent, reports Reuters.