

Prevalence of AIDS still low

Says minister

AGENCIES

The World AIDS Day was observed yesterday in the country as elsewhere across the world to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and demonstrate international solidarity to end the pandemic.

Theme of the day for 2011-2015 is "Getting to zero: zero new HIV infections. Zero discrimination. Zero AIDS related deaths".

The day was an opportunity for public and private partners to spread awareness about the status of the pandemic and encourage progress in its prevention, treatment and care in high prevalence countries and around the world, reports UNB.

Different organisations observed the day through holding processions, awareness campaigns and discussions across the country while National AIDS Congress-2012 took place at Osmani Memorial Hall in the capital.

Addressing the national congress, Health Minister AFM Ruhul Haque said Bangladesh was able to maintain its low prevalence status of HIV as the number of AIDS patients was still "less compared to other developing nations", reports BSS.

"Although we have been able to maintain low prevalence status of HIV, young generation and migrant workers are at risk of HIV infection," he added.

In 2012, as many as 390 HIV infected patients were detected in the country while AIDS patients stood at 103, the minister said, adding that the number of total HIV cases stood at 2,871 this year against 2,533 in 2011.

Ruhul urged all to work together to achieve the target of zero new infections and zero AIDS-related deaths by 2015.

Speaking as the special guest, PM's Advisor for Health and Family Welfare Prof Syed Modasser Ali said all parameters of health sector witnessed a good progress during the tenure of the present government.

UNFPA Country Representative to Bangladesh Arthur Erken, UNICEF Country Representative Dr Pascal Villeneuve, UNAIDS Country Coordinator Leo Keny and President of People Living with HIV Network Habiba Akhtar also addressed the event.

Erken observed that most of the people of Bangladesh did not have enough knowledge about AIDS and HIV, while stigma, discrimination and the role of media were hampering the prevention of the disease. He stressed the need for educating people, particularly married women and young generation, about the disease.

Habiba said only 800 HIV patients out of 2,871 were brought under Anti-Retro Viral (ARV) treatment and many remained out of treatment because of social stigma.

"Intensive awareness campaigns" should be launched across the country to remove social stigma and misconception about the disease, she added.

Other speakers said Bangladesh remained extremely vulnerable to HIV, given its dire poverty, overpopulation, gender inequality and high levels of transactional sex.

33 Rohingya intruders sent back

STAR REPORT

Border Guards Bangladesh yesterday sent 33 Rohingyas back to Myanmar after detaining them in Teknaf of Cox's Bazar for intruding into Bangladesh.

Lt Col Zahid Hasan, commanding officer of BGB 42 Battalion, said BGB personnel held 22 Rohingyas at Dham Dhamia and Hozaikang of Teknaf and they were sent back.

BGB 17 Battalion personnel detained 11 others and sent them back to Myanmar with food, claimed commander of the battalion Khalequazzaman.

Meanwhile, the anti-smuggling cell of Bangladesh Navy detained 20 Myanmar citizens and 12 Bangladeshis from a trawler near Kutubdia of Cox's Bazar yesterday afternoon.

The 32 were apparently trying to go to Malaysia illegally, said a Bangladesh Navy press release, adding that the arrestees were handed over to Patenga Police Station.

None of the gang members trying to smuggle them abroad could be arrested.

On November 7, a boat carrying 110 people trying to go to Malaysia capsized in the Bay near Teknaf. At least 60 people had gone missing then while 50 were either rescued or they swam ashore.

Rules bent

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bidder that received the data will have an advantage over them in the race to get the job for constructing the bridge in the \$2.9 billion project, now stalled due to alleged corruption in the bidding process.

They also alleged that two more short-listed bidders managed to obtain the confidential data either from the Malaysian firm or a section of unscrupulous officials at the Bridges Division.

The bidders that got the data have already worked on it. And this is an injustice to the other bidders that will get the same data when the tender for bridge's construction will be floated, they said.

Public Procurement Regulation and the WB's procurement guidelines stipulate that confidential data on a project cannot be shared with anyone before floating tenders because if any bidder gets the data, it will have an edge over its competitors.

The government in April signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Malaysia regarding the bridge's construction, and the data was shared with the Malaysian firm following the MoU.

The government moved to get alternative funding for the project after the WB suspended its \$1.2 billion funding in September last year over corruption allegations in the project.

The global lender then cancelled its credit for the project in June, saying it had proof of corruption conspiracy involving Bangladeshi officials, executives of a Canadian firm and individuals.

Padma bridge project director Shaiful Islam finds nothing wrong in sharing the project's data with the Malaysian firm.

"A company cannot submit a proposal if you don't give them necessary information," he said.

The official said all short-listed firms will have full access to information on the project so that they can submit their proposals without any problem.

Holding out the assurance that adequate time will be given to them to work on the data, Shaiful said he had no knowledge of any firm, other than Axisjaya, getting the data.

Daelim-Bam-VCI (a joint venture entity of Korea), China Major Bridge Engineering, China Communication Construction Company, and Vinci-HCC (a joint venture of France and India) are the other short-listed companies for the project.



The fire brigade inspects different garment factories in Ashulia to check their fire safety equipment yesterday, a week after 111 people died in the Tazreen Fashions blaze. The photo shows a fire-dousing hose of a factory leaking badly.

Fire check frustration

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extinguishers, hose pipes, water reservoirs and trained workers.

"The factories without fire safety licences will be shut down," said M Abdus Salam, director of Fire Service and Civil Defence, after the inspection yesterday.

And, factories with poor fire safety records would be given a month to address their faults, he added. "We will take action against the inspectors who have issued licences without verifying the fire safety measures."

One of the teams, led by Abdus Salam, found that Annesha Style Ltd, a sweater maker at Nishchintapur, did not have adequate fire extinguishers and fire alarms, while the hose pipes were found to be leaking.

An annoyed Salam told Annesha officials: "For how many years did you not check the pipes? Workers

are dying, don't you see that?"

The team also found ample fire risks at the factory's warehouse because of electrical short-circuit. As per regulations, warehouse lighting should be through power sources other than electricity.

Meanwhile, most workers were found lacking the knowledge to operate fire extinguishers.

"I have no idea," said Sumi, who was sitting at a workstation next to a fire extinguisher.

Similar feedback came from some other workers at the factory.

The fire service team also found that the factory management did not conduct regular fire drills.

Asked, KM Ahsan Mia, general manager of Annesha Style, claimed the factory had updated its fire safety licence.

"We will show it tomorrow [today]," he told The

Daily Star. He admitted that the company had been lethargic in addressing the shortcomings related to fire safety.

"But we will remove the lapses in line with the recommendations of the fire service department," he said.

The team also did not find a fire safety licence at S Nahar and Sons, a knit garment subcontracting factory located in the same building as Annesha Style Ltd.

When quizzed, Mashiur Rahman, director of the factory, could not come up with a satisfactory answer.

"We have leased the factory space from the previous owner. He had a fire safety licence, so we did not apply for our own. But now we will get it," said Mashiur.

The building also lacks adequate water reservoirs to fight fire.

The team also visited the

Ha-Meem Group premises and suggested disconnecting electric connection from the bonded warehouse to ensure best fire safety measures.

"We will remove it soon," said Md Masudur Rahman, human resources and compliance manager of Ha-Meem.

According to fire service laws, bonded warehouses must not have electric connection to avoid accidents.

The team also recommended setting up fire hydrant and heating detection systems at Ha-Meem Group.

Salam blamed negligence of the management of factories for not obtaining fire safety licence.

"Apart from legal issues, the factory owners have moral obligations to ensure proper and adequate fire safety measures for their workers," he said.

Early death

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found those with low muscle strength--weaker leg and arm muscles and a limp grip--were at increased risk of early death.

The team behind the BMJ study believes muscle strength reflects general fitness, which would explain the link.

Experts stress the findings do not mean muscle building makes you live longer.

The effect of poor muscular fitness in those tracked was similar to well established risk factors for early death, such as obesity and high blood pressure.

When the researchers took into account these better known risk factors, they found the link between early death and muscle power remained.

Thin and fat men alike fared worse in terms of life expectancy if they had weaker than average muscles, while more burly men had better survival odds even if they were overweight.

Over the course of the study, 26,145 (2.3 percent) of the men died. The leading single cause of death was accidental injury, followed

by suicide, cancer, heart disease and stroke.

A third of the deaths were due to other causes and the researchers grouped these together for their calculations.

The teenagers who scored above average on muscular strength at the start of the study had a 20-35 percent lower risk of early death from any cause and also from cardiovascular diseases.

They also had a 20-30 percent lower risk of early death from suicide and were up to 65 percent less likely to have any psychiatric diagnosis, such as schizophrenia or depression.

In comparison, the 16- to 19-year-olds with the lowest level of muscular strength had the highest risk of dying before they reached their mid-50s.

Judge held

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Jessore late in the evening. He was driving a microbus carrying the bottles of contraband cough syrup in a sack. Acting on a tip-off, police arrested him in front of Eden College around 7:20pm, said Syed Nurul Islam, deputy commissioner (DC-Ramna) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police.

Talking to reporters at the New Market Police Station, Javed said he joined Bhola court on November 8 from Jessore. He has been on leave for a month.

He claimed his cousin Sumon, who worked for Brac in its Kushtia office, had given him the Phensedyl consignment for one Lincoln in Dhaka.

He agreed to do it all for Tk 1.20 lakh that he needed badly.

Javed further claimed the pistol is licensed and his father Khaled Imam, a lawyer in Jhenidah, owns the microbus.

The DMP DC said they suspect Lincoln is either an informant for the law enforcers or a drug peddler.

Contacted around 2:30am today, duty officer at the New Market Police Station said a case had been filed in this connection.

Tazreen workers

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for three more months and 13 days in line with the labour laws.

A couple of days back, BGMEA announced it would arrange a month's salary for the workers of Tazreen Fashions, where a devastating fire on November 24 killed 111 people and injured around 100 others.

Since around 8:00am yesterday, the workers started to gather at the Nishchintapur primary school premises for their salary. An hour later, BGMEA leaders and officials reached the school ground and announced the workers would be taken to Industrial Relations Institute in Tongi and paid the last month's

salary.

The workers right away refused to go to Tongi and said they would not budge without four months and 13 days' salary.

As things threatened to spiral out of control, the BGMEA leaders held a meeting with government high-ups, local administration and police officials, and workers leaders to reach a decision on the issue.

After the meeting, police officials and the BGMEA leaders announced that the workers would have to be listed anew as Tazreen Fashions had lost all documents including staff registers in the fire, some workers told The Daily Star.

Abdul Ahad Ansary,

chairman of the BGMEA's standing committee on labour, education and welfare, said the association had preparations to pay a month's salary. But it could not do that yesterday, as the workers kept demanding extra salaries. To complicate matters further, he added, the workers raised some other demands.

Rafiqul Islam Sujan, a workers leader, told The Daily Star last night that factory staff had made a list of some 2000 workers who gathered at the school ground in the morning. The workers also put forward to the BGMEA a number of other demands that included an authentic list of those killed and injured in

the fire; Tk 10 lakh in compensation for the families of those killed; Tk 5 lakh for those injured; and proper treatment of the injured.

Atiqul Islam, former vice-president of BGMEA, told The Daily Star that there would be a meeting at the labour ministry on November 4 to decide on the amount of salary and other dues and compensation. Garment owners, government representatives, labour leaders and other stakeholders would participate in the meeting.

He hoped the workers would get all their dues by December 6.

No official of Tazreen could be reached over the phone for their comments.

Leather factory attacked

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under attack from the workers at around 3:00pm as its owners, like many readymade garment factories in the area, did not give in to their sudden call for production suspension.

"At least 50 of our staffers, most of them female, became victims of the attack. Over 25 of them were hospitalised with severe injuries," Musleh Uddin Ahmed, a deputy manager (store) of the factory, told The Daily Star.

Picard Bangladesh, which employs 1,200 people, manufactures leather hand bags, briefcases and small leather goods for exports. Apart from manufacturing its own brands, it produces products for customers based in Australia, Europe, Canada, Japan and Singapore, according to the company's website.

Witnesses and officials said the trouble started with a fire panic at a factory of Mascot Group in the area, which left 50 of its workers wounded and prompted its owners into declaring the remaining day off for workers at its three factories.

When its workers came out of the factory, those in other factories in the area followed suit fearing attacks. Garment workers gath-

ered on the road in front of Picard Bangladesh and started agitating, demanding production suspension at the factory at around 2:45pm, witnesses said.

Several hundred workers broke open the main gate and attacked all the units housed in three separate buildings of the factory in around an hour of the rampage, the witnesses said.

They also damaged six vehicles of the factory, which were parked on the factory premises.

A visit to the factory after the vandalism revealed that all glass, windowpanes and furniture of the building had been damaged, vehicles smashed and flower tubs in the garden broken. Ashes caused by fire were seen at the main entrance of the factory.

During the attacks, around 15 policemen were seen hiding for safety inside a building in front of the leather factory when the attackers looted valuables and vandalised the factories, creating a panicky situation among the workers, security guards and officials of the factory.

The unruly workers first started damaging the window panes of the factory by pelting brick chips. At one

stage, they stormed it by breaking its main gate made of heavy steel," said Mohammad Shahjahan, a security guard of the leather factory, who suffered severe injuries when he fell under the broken gate.

Shahjahan said, "Soon after the attackers stormed into the premises, they went violent. Many of them resorted to vandalism from outside the buildings, equipped with various sticks and brick chips while many others ran into all the buildings for looting."

Saiful Islam, managing director of Picard Bangladesh, said, "At one point of the violent attack, I along with my daughter [Amrita Markin Islam, who is also the head of business of the factory], had to hide in the strong room to save our lives."

He said the attackers either might have been the workers of various RMG factories or criminals.

One of the leading entrepreneurs of the country, Saiful vented his anger over the reluctance of the police to respond.

"We begged for the security of our lives from the police by phone. You (police) please come. But the police did not come on time," said a frustrated Saiful, standing at

the factory premises, which were littered mostly with broken glass and brickbats.

"Today, we were really afraid for our lives. There is no security of our lives, our factories," he said.

His daughter Amrita Makin Islam, who is head of operations and business development, was present at the time of the attacks.

"What is my fault? Have I committed any mistake by setting up industries in the country and exporting from this country?" Saiful asked.

He told Industrial Police director Golam Rouf: "If you (police) had reached on time, such severe damage might not have been caused to the property."

"You know, it is a Bangladesh-German joint venture. Now what shall I tell them about it?" he asked.

Industrial police, however, said they had tried their best.

Golam Rouf said, "We have done our best. We dispersed the attackers and saved the factory from their bid to burn it down."

He, however, acknowledged the limitations of the police and said they had to make their way to the factory through several agitations and clashes by the workers of many other factories in the area.

Govt lying

Fakhrul says BNP not out to save war criminals

UNB, Dhaka

The BNP yesterday trashed the prime minister's claim that the opposition had announced agitation programmes in the month of victory to save the war criminals, saying Sheikh Hasina was misleading people.

"The government is lying and trying to confuse people about our movement. We've announced the action programmes to realise people's demands, not to protect the war criminals," said BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir.

He was talking to journalists after placing wreaths at the grave of BNP founder and late president Ziaur Rahman on the occasion of the 16th founding anniversary of Jatiyatabadi Muktiyoddha Projanmo.

In her winding up speech at the 15th session of the ninth parliament on Thursday, the prime minister alleged that the opposition leader had announced movements and programmes for December to save the war criminals.

Hasina also alleged that the BNP chief had announced agitation programmes from her Wednesday rally, keeping war criminals, killers, dacoits and terrorists on the stage with her. "Bravo, bravo opposition leader... she now patronises Razakars," added the premier.

Denouncing her remarks, Fakhrul said the BNP chief had announced the fresh programmes as part of the opposition's ongoing movement to press home its various demands, including the restoration of the caretaker government system.

The BNP spokesperson vowed to continue the movement until the demands were met. "The movement won't be resisted by creating any obstacle; rather it will gradually be harsher," he warned, adding that the BNP in no way would participate in the next general elections under any party government.

Hillary

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proposal as "counter-productive".

The Israeli decision followed a UN General Assembly vote to upgrade the Palestinians' status to non-member observer state.

Thursday's UN motion was carried by 138 votes to nine with 41 abstentions. Israel and the US voted against the proposal.

Addressing a Washington audience that included Israel's Defence Minister Ehud Barak and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, Hillary said the vote "should give all of us pause. All sides need to consider carefully the path ahead".

The Palestinians had to be persuaded, she said, that negotiations with Israel were the only path to an independent state.

It was in Israel's interest, she added, to make generous steps towards Palestinians in the West Bank as a bulwark for Israeli security, "whether or not there is a comprehensive agreement in the near future".

UK Foreign Secretary William Hague said he was "extremely concerned" at the move, adding that the UK "strongly advises the Israeli government to reverse this decision".

Hillary was having talks late on Friday with both Israeli ministers who were attending the Washington forum as well as Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad.

The US voted against the Palestinian Authority president's UN motion, agreeing with Israel that it would make a return to peace talks harder.

Israeli government spokesman Mark Regev said the UN vote was "negative political theatre" that would "hurt peace".

An Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said some of the new units would be built between Jerusalem and the settlement of Maaleh Adumim.

Plans to build settlements in the area, known as EI, are strongly opposed by Palestinians, who say the development will cut the West Bank in two, preventing the creation of a contiguous Palestinian state.