

Dengue spreading faster nationwide

Some 1,250 infected outside Dhaka

STAR REPORT

The number of dengue infected patients in different districts is increasing alarmingly, indicating that the disease is quickly spreading across the country.

Over 1,250 dengue patients have been identified in Chattogram, Feni, Dinajpur, Mymensingh, Kishoreganj, Brahmanbaria, Narsingdi, Nilphamari, Tangail, Barishal, Jhenaidah, Khulna, Pabna and Bogura.

Most of the patients had been to Dhaka before they were diagnosed with dengue, health officials said.

In Feni, officials have so far diagnosed 147 patients. Only four of them had not travelled to Dhaka recently, said Civil Surgeon Hayutuzzaman.

At Khulna Medical College Hospital, Registrar Partho Protim Debnath said dengue patients were increasing by the day. "We are struggling to accommodate them. We also need more dengue detection kits."

With a few exceptions, most government hospitals in the districts can detect and treat dengue patients.

But in Barishal city, neither the state-run Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital nor any private clinics has received any dengue virus detection kit.

The Mymensingh Medical College Hospital and M Abdur Rahim Medical College Hospital in Dinajpur have started round-the-clock dengue diagnosis service.

Health officials in Mymensingh said they had supplied NS1 kits, needed for dengue diagnosis, to 11 upazila health complexes in the district.

Officials at most government hospitals in metropolitan cities claimed that they were equipped to treat dengue patients.

Meanwhile, health rights activists in Chattogram alleged that many private clinics were charging their people exorbitant sums for diagnosis.

Our correspondents from Chattogram, Feni, Dinajpur, Mymensingh, Kishoreganj, Brahmanbaria, Narsingdi, Nilphamari, Barishal, Jhenaidah, Khulna, Pabna and Bogura contributed to the story.



Farmers trying to salvage raw jute in an inundated char area of Bogura's Sariakandi upazila a couple of days ago. The district administration says the recent floods have damaged jute on around 10,500 hectares of land in Bogura.

PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUJ

Hasina directs party men to check mosquito breeding

BSS, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday directed Awami League leaders and activists to take proper steps to check mosquito breeding.

"I've already given various instructions to get rid of the dengue menace. So, I urge everybody to take proper measures by obeying my directives so that mosquito breeding cannot take place," she said.

Hasina, also AL president, said, "You'll have to protect yourselves, your family and houses from mosquitoes."

The PM made the comments while inaugurating a blood donation programme and tree plantation campaign of Bangladesh Krishak League in the capital's Dhanmondi through a teleconference from London yesterday.

She said Bangladesh had lost all potentials and the ideology of the Liberation War had been damaged after the assassination of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Extra charges

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clearing and forwarding agents not to pay the new charges, creating uncertainty over timely shipment of many export cargoes.

BGMEA First Vice President MA Salam said the hike would increase export costs and have a negative impact on the country's readymade garments industries. He added that they would not pay any additional charge until the tariff committee formed by the shipping ministry makes a decision.

Chattogram Customs Clearing and Forwarding Agents Association General Secretary Ataf Hossain told The Daily Star yesterday that the association's members had already been directed not to pay any additional charges to ICDs against export containers.

Due to the latest increase in the 12 types of service charges for landing, stuffing, labour, documentation and lifting, among others, the cost of total exports and imports would rise by around Tk 150 crore annually, industry insiders say.

According to the revised charges, for a 20 feet export container package (stuffing), costs increased by 25 percent from Tk 3,600 to Tk 4,500; per tonne landing charges rose by 25 percent from Tk 180 to Tk 225 and per carton labour charges increased by 50 percent from Tk 3 to Tk 4.50.

For a 20-feet export container the ICDs' service charges have now gone up by Tk 2,000 on average.

Almost 90 percent of export goods are stuffed into containers at the 19 private ICDs, also known as off-docks, located in and around the port city, before shipment through the Chattogram port.

Another 21 percent of the import containers are sent from the port to the ICDs, from where the goods are delivered.

BICDA on February 28 issued a circular increasing 12 types of tariffs by 20 to 25 percent on average.

Owners say the increased costs are a result of devaluation of local currency against the US dollar and a rise in overheads such as fuel, labour and equipment maintenance.

ENDLESS COMMITTEES, UNWAVERING DEADLOCKS
In its February 28 circular, the BICDA said a committee of the Chattogram Port Authority (CPA) in a 2016 report said that the ICDs' operational and other related costs had increased by 42 percent between 2011 and 2015, and so the charges should have been raised accordingly.

BICDA President Nurul Qayyum Khan said upon insistence from the stakeholders and requests by the CPA, they had agreed to an increase of 20 percent only.

"The then CPA chairman had also assured us that the charges would be increased by another 20 percent after a year," he said, adding that almost two years had passed since the deadline for the second review of the tariffs.

The disparity in the increase in operational costs and the rates being charged by the depots resulted in the ICDs struggling to maintain operational efficiency, he said, adding that they were forced to revise the tariffs to save the sector.

The depots had earlier announced the new charges would be effective from April 1, but postponed the decision following requests from the shipping ministry and the CPA. Insiders claim the request for postponement came from exporters, importers and freight forwarders, among others.

The shipping ministry on April 1 this year formed an 11-member tariff committee headed by Shipping Ministry Joint Secretary Abdus Sattar Sheikh and held a meeting on the same day.

The BICDA president said it was the first meeting which came three years after the ICD Policy was formulated in June 2016.

The tariff committee held three meetings and formed another 13-member committee. The new committee, headed by Chattogram Port Authority (CPA) Member (Harbour and Marine) Captain M Shafiq Bari, then formed a sub-committee headed by CPA Assistant Terminal Manager (ATM) Ashraf Islam to work on the same issue.

"In several meetings of these committees, our voice was suppressed since we are the only service provider member, whereas the majority members are service takers," said Khan, adding that the issue of fixing ICD tariffs was delayed as the service takers always opposed any raise in the charges.

On July 25, BICDA President Nurul Qayyum Khan in a letter sent to the shipping ministry secretary stated that they waited for the ministry's steps in reviewing the charges, but the lack of progress led to the depots realise the newly revised tariffs.

Khan said since April, nothing had come of the committees formed by the shipping ministry and CPA to review tariffs.

Quoting the shipping ministry secretary, Bangladesh Freight Forwarders Association (BAFFA) Director Kabir Ahmed, who was present at the yesterday's meeting, said the committee would submit its report soon.

In yesterday's meeting, the issue of the ICD policy was also brought up and it was argued that ICDs cannot alone revise its charges.

Bangladesh Freight Forwarders Association (BAFFA) Director Kabir Ahmed said the ministry secretary who chaired the meeting urged BICDA not to enhance the tariffs since a committee was working to fix those.

He said BICDA could increase tariffs but should wait for the committee's report.

The 19 ICDs handled around 6.15 lakh TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units) of export containers, 2.86 lakh TEUs import containers and 5.87 lakh TEUs empty containers in 2018-2019 fiscal year.

Import insecticide immediately

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Private hospitals can do the same on humanitarian ground, said the HC bench of Justice Tariq Ul Hakim and Justice Md Shohrwardi.

The court will hold a further hearing on the matter on August 18 when it reopens after Eid vacation.

Earlier in the day, the HC summoned LGRD Secretary Helal Uddin Ahmed to appear before it and clarify as to who is responsible for importing mosquito insecticide.

Counsels for both the city corporations say the responsibility lies with the government.

But Helal told the court that the city corporation authorities were tasked with the job and that the government had already allocated funds and provided manpower for importing the insecticide from China.

The court said the existing insecticide was not working and that import of effective insecticide was being delayed due to bureaucratic tangle.

The secretary said the government cannot import the insecticide as it issued licence to a company to do the job.

The court wondered why the government, being the licensing authority, cannot go for the import itself.

Helal later told the court the insecticide would be imported from a Chinese private firm, and the government cannot import directly from private entities.

The two city corporation lawyers said once the sample insecticides arrived, they will run a lab test. And if the test finds nothing harmful, they will import the insecticide in 14 working days.

"TRYING OUR BEST"
Amid concerns over a further spread of the disease, DSCC Mayor Sayeed Khokon said they were trying their best to control the outbreak by the first week of next month.

"Efforts are on to prevent the mosquito-borne disease and we are trying our best," the mayor told journalists at the health ministry yesterday.

Citing a DGHS survey, he said, 10 wards of the DSCC were now free from dengue. The wards are 14, 15, 18, 22, 23, 29, 35, 42, 55 and 56.

"If Aedes mosquitoes are found there again, we will take necessary steps," he said.

Contacted, Prof Dr ABM Abdullah said it was difficult to announce a particular area dengue-free.

"You can drive out mosquitos from a certain area, but there is no guarantee that they will not return to that place the next day," said Prof Abdullah, former dean and head of medicine at the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University.

Khokon's counterpart in the north Atiqul Islam said destroying the source of Aedes mosquito required a lot of work throughout the year.

He said they have invited Kolkata deputy mayor and acting panel mayor of the health department Atin Ghosh to help Bangladesh tackle the outbreak.

Ghosh is expected to arrive on Sunday, he said.

Over the last few years, Kolkata City Corporation has been working round the year to control Aedes mosquito population.

About importing mosquito repellent, he said they would do so in a "very short time", but did not give any date.

MINISTER MUM
Health Minister Zahid Maleque, who is under fire for going to Malaysia on a family trip amid the dengue outbreak, yesterday avoided questions from journalists.

He also cancelled his planned press conference to brief journalists on the latest situation.

Facing criticism over his failure to control the outbreak, he cut his trip short and returned home yesterday.

He kept mum when journalists asked him about his trip when he went to inaugurate the 100-bed dengue unit at the Mitford Hospital in the capital.

Later the minister attended a programme at the ministry with the two mayors, experts and high government officials.

There too he avoided all questions about his family trip during a national crisis.

Health Secretary Asadul Islam said the minister would hold a press conference in a day or two and reply to all questions from journalists.

India wants

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informed the matter to the civil aviation ministry, it asked the foreign ministry to seek a detailed technical proposal and sketch map from India," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

The detail proposal should explain exactly where and how India wants the land, how much land is required and the ground on which it will be used, he said, adding that the civil aviation ministry was yet to receive any response.

Once India submits the technical proposal, the civil aviation ministry will sit with the foreign ministry to check whether Bangladesh's laws have any provision to allow any other country to use Bangladeshi land, he said.

Contacted, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal said he knew about one such proposal from India and that any decision in this regard would come from the prime minister.

"But my opinion is why should I give any Bangladeshi land to India? There should be no question about it," he told The Daily Star.

The Airport Authority of India (AAI) had undertaken a Rs 438 crore project to upgrade the Agartala airport, which is renamed as Maharaja Bir Bikram Airport, to international standards by providing world-class facilities, Indian newspaper The Economic Times reported on June 18.

Expansion and upgradation of Maharaja Bir Bikram Airport is part of AAI's Rs 3,400 crore projects for the upgradation of various airports in the Indian northeastern region that has historically been underdeveloped, the newspaper said.

Tripura Transport and Tourism Minister Pranajit Singha Roy said following the completion of the project, flights between Agartala and Dhaka, as well as other Bangladeshi cities like Chattogram and Sylhet, would be operated.

"The state government had already provided 72 acres of land to the AAI for construction of the new terminal building, runway and other necessary infrastructure," he said.

According to AAI officials, the Agartala airport, which is located 20 km north of the capital city of Agartala, sits just along the Bangladesh border. It handled on an average nine lakh passengers per year, The Economic Times reported.

Asked about the matter, Dhaka University International Relations' Prof Dr Imtiaz Ahmed said there were some airports that fall on the borders of two or even three countries. One of them, for example, is Geneva International Airport situated both in Switzerland and France.

"However, the context of South Asia is not comparable to that of Europe. It is because of the structures of immigration, currency and politics," he told The Daily Star.

There are the questions of sovereignty, security and political implications, he said.

He, however, said if Bangladesh is to provide the land for the Agartala airport, its government must address the issues of security, sovereignty and commercial viability.

6 Ansar al Islam men indicted

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US-based Bangladeshi blogger Avijit Roy was murdered near the Teacher-Student Centre of Dhaka University by a gang of assailants in an attack that also left his wife severely wounded.

Avijit's father Prof Ajay Roy filed the murder case against unidentified assailants with Shahbagh Police Station.

According to the charge sheet submitted to the court on March 14, banned militant outfit Ansar Al Islam targeted Avijit for his writings, especially for his books Obisshaher Dorshon (The Philosophy of Disbelief) and Biswasher Virus (The Virus of Faith).

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Though investigators found involvement of 12 people in the killing, six were left out of the charge sheet as details of five of them could not be known and the 6th suspect Mukul Rana, who was allegedly the operation commander of the murder, was killed in a "gunfight" with detectives in the Capital's Khilgaon area on June 19, 2016.

Father killed at daughter's wedding

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leaving them critically injured," said Alamgir Hossain, brother-in-law of Dulal.

dead. Firoza was later shifted to DMCH. Sajib had long been stalking the girl, Alamgir told The Daily Star.

Abdur Rashid, officer-in-charge of Hatirjheel Police Station, said police arrested Sajib in March after Dulal filed a case against him on charge of sexually harassing his daughter.

He was released from jail on bail after a month, the OC said.