

3 VIRUS-INFECTED PATIENTS

Two of them now test negative

Says IEDCR after running 2nd test on them

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Of the three reported coronavirus patients in Bangladesh, two were diagnosed negative as tests were conducted on them for the second time on Tuesday.

"Their health status is better and they will be released soon as per the WHO protocol," Dr Meerjady Sabrina Flora, director, Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), said yesterday.

The third patient, however, tested positive in the second test but is currently in a stable condition, she said at a regular press briefing organised at the IEDCR in Mohakhali.

Apart from the three, the IEDCR tested a total of 10 new samples in the last 24 hours and all the test results were negative, Dr Meerjady said.

Bangladesh on March 8 confirmed its first three cases of coronavirus. Two of them had recently returned from Italy.

Covid-19 -- the seventh strain of the virus that was first detected in China's Wuhan city in December --

can remain in the human body for up to 14 days without showing any symptom, according to WHO.

The IEDCR also announced a single hotline number: 01944333222.

"Callers often find the existing numbers busy. Now calls will be automatically forwarded to the numbers that are not busy," Prof Meerjady added.

The IEDCR has requested people who arrive in Bangladesh from abroad to keep themselves in quarantine at home for about two weeks.

"If they develop any symptom of COVID-19 during the quarantine period, they are asked to contact IEDCR," she said.

Meanwhile, the IEDCR yesterday collected blood sample of a person in Cumilla. The person returned from Singapore on March 6.

He contacted the IEDCR as he had been suffering from flu for about three days, reports our Cumilla correspondent.

In Dinajpur, the IEDCR collected blood sample of another person who returned from China on February 27.



A primary school girl holding a leaflet distributed by local volunteers to create awareness about coronavirus. The photo was taken at Kulaura Ideal School in Moulvibazar yesterday.

PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

Govt readying 6 hospitals

FROM PAGE 1

Asked whether the healthcare personnel would be given necessary protective gear, like hazmat suits, masks, gloves, Aminul said they were assessing equipment requirements for treating patients and would ensure those were available.

The DGHS is working with the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) in this regard.

The finance ministry released Tk 50 crore for the DGHS' coronavirus response, according to a finance ministerial letter to the DGHS on Tuesday.

Of the amount, the finance division set aside over Tk 45.51 crore for purchasing surgical equipment and treating infected people. The rest will be used in public awareness campaigns and for buying chemical re-agents, the letter said.

Bangladesh on March 8 confirmed three cases of coronavirus infections. Two of them had returned from Italy recently.

The novel coronavirus -- the seventh

strain of the virus that was first detected in China's Wuhan city in December -- can remain in human body for up to 14 days without the infected showing any symptoms, according to the WHO.

RAILWAY HOSPITALS

The railway hospitals are under the railways ministry, not the health ministry.

Railways ministry Senior Secretary Mofazzel Hossain said they have permitted the health ministry to use the Bangladesh Railway Hospital at Kamalapur for treating COVID-19 patients.

If necessary, they would allow nine other railway hospitals for such use, he told The Daily Star yesterday.

"We held a meeting today [Wednesday] over the management of those hospitals where the decision was made," he said.

A DGHS official said if the number of COVID-19 patients increased, the 62-bed hospital at Kamalapur could be upgraded to a 100-bed one.

A railway official said most of the railway hospitals have very low number

of patients and they could be moved to other hospitals in need be.

Shamsul Alam Md Imtiaz, chief medical officer (East) of Bangladesh Railway, said there were only eight patients at the Kamalapur Railway Hospital where 12 doctors are employed.

"It would not be difficult to move the patients to other hospitals if the government wanted to use it for coronavirus affected people," he said.

Meanwhile, Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital today opens an outdoor department to identify potential infected persons.

Prof Uttam Kumar Barua, director of the hospital, said, "We are launching the department with three doctors and a separate ticket counter. Patients with fever, cough and breathing problems will be referred to this department.

The doctors will note down patient's history and if they find anyone with COVID-19 symptoms, they would inform the IEDCR," he said.

The director also said they are planning to set up a 20-bed isolation unit at the hospital.

IEDCR was 'slow to act'

FROM PAGE 1

passengers of the flights, not all of them, and the IEDCR move came only on Monday, almost two days after the three were tested coronavirus positive.

Besides, until Tuesday, the IEDCR could not trace all the people who came in contact with the three in Bangladesh, said insiders at the IEDCR and the airport.

One of the Italy returnees landed at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) on February 26, said one of his relatives and sources at the airport.

His wife then contracted the virus.

The Daily Star can also confirm that the man went to a local diagnostic centre in his hometown before being tested coronavirus positive.

But these correspondents could not confirm whether anyone from the diagnostic centre has been quarantined.

The other Italy returnee came to the country in a flight in the first week of this month, said sources at the HSIA.

The sources said the IEDCR sought information on eight passengers from each of the two flights.

They also said none of the officials at the airport was in quarantine.

At the March 8 press conference, IEDCR Director Prof Meerjady Sabrina Flora did not disclose information on the other passengers of two flights for "privacy reasons".

Contacted by phone on Tuesday evening, she would not say whether any other passengers were quarantined.

"Why do you ask about personal

information of the passengers? From my part, I cannot share any confidential information about anybody," Prof Flora told The Daily Star.

She, however, claimed that they had already traced all the people, feared to have come in close contact with the three coronavirus patients, in line with the WHO protocol.

In case any passenger of a flight is found to be infected, the protocol is to do follow-up on passengers who sat in the front and back rows of where the infected passenger was seated, she said.

THE CONFUSION

Responding to a question, the IEDCR chief claimed all the aircraft coming from coronavirus-hit countries were being disinfected.

"As per the international regulations, all airlines are bound to disinfect the aircraft properly and do they do it," she said.

The Daily Star, however, came to know from airport sources that the flights which carried the two Italy returnees were not completely disinfected as of Tuesday.

"Biman Bangladesh Airlines is responsible for cleaning services for all other airlines. We held a meeting yesterday [Tuesday]. They would do it from now," Group Captain AHM Touhid-ul Ahsan, a director at the airport, told The Daily Star yesterday evening.

Experts said the way IEDCR has so far handled the coronavirus situation

indicates that many more people, who might have been exposed to the virus, are out of the radar.

They said passengers, especially those who sat close to the two infected passengers on the flights, and health, security and immigration staffers, involved in screening and immigration and ground handling process at the airport, were also vulnerable to the infection.

"The specialty of this new virus is rapid transmissibility. Those who came in close contact with the two infected people [passengers] all the way from Italy are vulnerable to be infected," Prof Saif Ullah Munshi, chairman of BSMMU's virology department, told The Daily Star last night.

He thinks all who came in contact with the infected ones should have been quarantined.

"Preparations should be taken taking the worst possible situation into consideration. Otherwise, there will be loopholes in the plan," he said.

Another expert, Prof Mozaherul Huq who served as the regional director of World Health Organisation (WHO), also opined that all the passengers and crew members of the two flights, people involved in immigration process, and others who came in close contact with the passengers might be infected.

"The virus can enter the internal system of the body through three paths -- mouth, nose and eyes. It is sure those passengers touched

WHO says it's now pandemic

FROM PAGE 1

"The use of this term [pandemic] however highlights the importance of countries throughout the world working cooperatively and openly with one another and coming together as a united front in our efforts to bring this situation under control," said Nathalie MacDermott, an expert at King's College London.

Mark Woolhouse, professor of infectious disease epidemiology at Britain's Edinburgh University, added: "It is now clear that COVID-19 is going to be with us for a considerable length of time and the actions that we take must be actions that we can live with for a prolonged period."

WAR CHESTS

Before the WHO's comments, Italy and Britain announced they were setting aside large sums to fight the flu-like disease.

Britain launched a 30-billion-pound (\$38.54 billion) economic stimulus plan as new finance minister Rishi Sunak said the economy faced a "significant impact" from the spread of the virus, even if it was likely to be temporary.

"Up to a fifth of the working-age population could need to be off work at any one time. And business supply chains are being disrupted around the globe," Sunak said in an annual budget speech to parliament.

The young woman is not ready to give up yet. With hope in her voice, she said, "If the operation [transplantation] is done this year, next year I will contest at the Faridpur Bar Council election."

Meanwhile, UK Health minister and Conservative MP Nadine Dorries

was diagnosed with coronavirus yesterday.

Last week, Italy's cabinet said it would need \$8.46 billion to fight the virus, but since then the emergency has escalated and the nation, already close to recession, is under lockdown, with the death toll now 827.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte on Wednesday earmarked \$28.3 billion to ease the economic impact. He said that already tough restrictions on movement might be tightened further after the northern region of Lombardy, centred on Italy's financial capital Milan, asked for all shops to shut and public transport to close.

And the United States saw the first signs of an emergency footing with the New York city government forming a containment zone around a suburb at the centre of an outbreak.

US President Donald Trump has promised "major" economic stimulus measures, the biggest item on his wish list being a cut in payroll taxes.

National Guard troops were being called in to help deliver food and enforce the zone around New Rochelle, with officials insisting the measures were designed only to facilitate self-quarantine, not to isolate the area. The number of infections there almost doubled on Tuesday to top 1,000.

The WHO's Ryan said the situation in Iran was "very serious" and the agency would like to see more

surveillance and more care for the sick. Iran has reported 237 deaths from the virus.

Kianush Jahanpur, a spokesperson at Iran's health ministry, said, "We have identified 958 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection in the last 24 hours, increasing the total number of cases to 9,000 across Iran."

South Korea yesterday reported a jump in new coronavirus cases, reversing 11 days of slowing infections, as authorities tested hundreds of staff at a Seoul call centre where the disease broke out this week.

Another 242 new cases were reported, compared with 35 a day earlier, bringing the total to 7,755 in Asia's worst outbreak outside mainland China, the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) said. The official death toll rose by four to 63.

China, still the worst-affected country with more than 80,000 cases and over 3,000 deaths, offered hope to the rest of the world by again announcing negligible new daily infections and only a relatively small number of deaths.

Some businesses in China's central Hubei province -- where the virus was first detected in December -- were told they could resume operations, reducing fears of a prolonged disruption of supply chains.

German Chancellor Angela

Virus scales back Japan events marking 2011 disaster

AFP, Tokyo

Japan yesterday marked the ninth anniversary of the killer tsunami that triggered the Fukushima nuclear meltdown, but the coronavirus outbreak forced public commemorations to be scaled back.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe cancelled the annual public ceremony at the National Theatre, attended by members of the royal family and people from the northeastern region hardest-hit by the 2011 tsunami, earthquake and nuclear accident.

The cancellation was extremely regrettable but "it's time to take every possible measure to prevent the spread of infections in our country," said Abe at a small wreath-laying ceremony at his office in Tokyo.

He offered condolences to those who lost loved ones and renewed his pledge to rebuild the disaster-hit region.

"We should not allow precious lessons from the disaster to fade away," Abe added.

The country fell silent for a minute at 2:46 pm (0546 GMT), the exact time a 9.0-magnitude earthquake struck the seabed off Miyagi prefecture on March 11, 2011.

Under light drizzle in Tokyo's Hibya Park, mourners gathered to pray silently in front of an altar strewn with cherry blossom -- most wearing protective masks.

Naoya Matsuoka, a 32-year-old staff member at a financial company, said it was important to defy the coronavirus to pay respect to the 18,500 killed or missing.

"We are now facing all different issues (like the virus) and hear lots of noise about holding events, but the disaster is something we must not forget. So I am here," he said.

The government has urged the public to cancel or postpone major gatherings or unnecessary outings in a drive to contain the spread of the coronavirus, which has infected 568 people and been linked to 12 deaths in Japan.

The call has resulted in the shutdown of schools and the cancellation or rescheduling of everything from music concerts to football matches, while graduation ceremonies, fashion shows and a sumo tournament have taken place behind closed doors.

doorknobs, and the handles of stairs and toilets [of the aircraft]. So others are also vulnerable," he said.

"The severity of infection in a highly-populous country like Bangladesh has to be taken into consideration. The preparations must be taken in accordance with this. All other organisations need to be officially involved; otherwise, the government would not be able to tackle the situation," said the public health specialist, who founded the Public Health Foundation of Bangladesh.

He suggested that first concentration should be on the airport. "There should be a special establishment to screen all the passengers from any coronavirus-hit country; China has done this. The entire aircraft, its crew members and other staffers involved also must be freed from infection."

Prof Mahmudul Rahman, a former director of IEDCR, said, "In case a passenger comes from places like China's Wuhan or Italy in a direct flight, the person must go through stringent screening. If it is suggested by any technical committee, all the passengers of the flight should be kept quarantined."

"Except this issue [airport screening], we have many more important things such as early case detection, surveillance, looking for cases within the country, and whether we have the mechanism to take care of the patients," he added.

Merkel said up to 70 percent of the population was likely to be infected as the virus spreads around the world in the absence of a cure.

As of Tuesday's close, \$8.1 trillion in value had been erased from global stock markets in the recent rout.

But not all the news was bad. Some key industries in Wuhan, the Chinese city at the epicentre of the epidemic and a hub of car manufacturing, were told they could resume work on Wednesday, a day after President Xi Jinping visited the city for the first time since the outbreak began.

INDIA SUSPENDS MOST VISAS

India last night announced suspension of most categories of existing visas, including tourist visas, from tomorrow until April 15 to prevent further spread of the coronavirus.

However, the restriction will not be applicable for the visas issued for diplomats, officials of UN and other international organisations, and project visas, reports our New Delhi correspondent.

The revised travel advisory will be effective from 12:00 GMT tomorrow, the health ministry said in a statement.

The decision to issue the new advisory was taken at a high-level meeting headed by Health Minister Harsh Vardhan, as the number of positive cases of coronavirus virus across India went up to 67.