

Nearly half the world

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conditions.

Although there are hopeful signs the spread of infections is slowing in both countries, hundreds are still dying every day, leading authorities to extend nationwide shutdowns despite their crushing economic impact.

Elsewhere Poland toughened restrictions on movement while Russia expanded lockdowns across its territory as infections ticked up.

According to a new study from the Imperial College London, strict containment measures might have already saved up to 59,000 lives across 11 European countries.

Even so, health facilities are in overdrive, with distressed medical staff forced to make grim decisions about how to distribute limited protective gear and life-saving respirators.

The United States was preparing for its darkest days after known infections topped 164,000 -- the highest number in the world.

In scenes previously unimaginable in peacetime, a field hospital was set to open in New York's Central Park after a medical ship with 1,000 beds docked outside the city.

Like France, the US is nearing the 3,305 death toll recorded in China, where the virus emerged late last year but has since come under control.

While companies and schools around the globe have shifted to teleworking and teaching over video platforms, huge swaths of the world's workforce cannot perform their jobs online are now lacking pay in the face of a deeply uncertain future.

New York city food banks have seen a surge of newcomers who have

lost their wages. Three-quarters of Americans are now under some form of lockdown after Maryland, Virginia and Washington DC became the latest to join the roll call.

President Donald Trump sought to reassure Americans that authorities were ramping up distribution of equipment such as ventilators and personal protective gear.

But he also warned that "challenging times are ahead for the next 30 days" and acknowledged a potential nationwide stay-at-home order.

"We're sort of putting it all on the line," Trump said, again likening the efforts against coronavirus to a "war."

Meanwhile finance ministers and central bankers from the world's 20 major economies welcomed a \$160 billion World Bank relief package to be deployed over the next 15 months to support its member countries, the Saudi hosts said in a statement.

They agreed to press ahead with a plan to address "the risk of debt vulnerabilities in low-income countries" and work to "swiftly deliver... financial assistance to emerging markets and developing countries", the statement said.

The economic pain of lockdowns is especially acute in impoverished cities in Africa and Asia.

The pandemic threatens to plunge up to 11 million East Asians into poverty, according to a new World Bank report.

In the worse-case scenario outlined by the Washington-based financial institution, the region could suffer its sharpest downturn in more than two decades, plunging much of Asia into a prolonged recession.

Low test rate

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two fresh cases were detected.

A lack of sample collectors is one of the major reasons behind limited testing. The institute has only 20 staffers who collect samples in the capital, said sources.

Just a couple of days ago, medical technologists of 130 healthcare organisations completed training, arranged by the government, for collecting samples from suspected Covid-19 patients.

A shortage of test kits, on the other hand, initially hindered the government's response to the crisis. Like other countries, Bangladesh too had difficulties in getting the kits from abroad because of flight restrictions imposed by several countries.

At a press briefing yesterday, Habibur Rahman, director of Management Information System of the DGHS, said they collected 92,000 kits for Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) tests, and of those, 21,000 were already sent to different laboratories.

The country is now scaling up its testing capacity. It is now readying seven organisations in the capital and three outside for conducting tests.

"We have already increased the testing capacity within a short period of time," said Habibur.

He mentioned that they plan to increase by April 20 the number of Covid-19 testing organisations to 28.

By April 5, three labs will be ready in the capital and another five in other parts of the country for conducting Covid-19 tests. By April 20, four more labs will be prepared in the capital and six outside, said Habibur.

The Daily Star yesterday learnt that the labs in Mymensingh and Rangpur were yet to start conducting tests.

Experts say the government should have expanded the testing facilities much before, preferably by February, when it became clear that the epidemic was spreading across the globe.

Bangladesh cannot afford to lose any more time as it has already spent three months on preparations for dealing with the crisis, they point out.

They say the US and Spain, which did not put emphasis on widespread testing, are now seeing an explosion of cases.

On the other hand, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, which have so

OMS rice

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other stakeholders for the guideline.

The secretary added that the special OMS programme might continue until the upcoming Boro season.

Food ministry officials said the government has different programmes to ensure food for the country's poor living in rural areas. But it does not have any such programme for the poor and the disadvantaged living in urban areas.

The government move -- the special OMS programme -- for the urban poor came five days after it went for a 10-day shutdown.

Thousands of marginalised people are in a tight spot amid the shutdown as they cannot go outside and earn their livelihoods.

Like many others, the urban poor have also found themselves in a precarious situation and are passing their days in hardship.

They largely cannot meet their basic needs, including food, as their income opportunities have dropped significantly.

As part of the efforts to alleviate the economic pains of low-income groups, including labourers, rickshaw pullers and street vendors, the government has planned to sell the rice through the special OMS programme.

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' poverty data of 2016, 26.6

percent of service workers, 22.8 percent of production-and transport-related workers, and 17.7 percent of sales workers are dealing with poverty.

A World Bank report says only 17.84 percent of the country's poor people living in towns and cities receive support from social safety schemes, whereas 35.77 percent of the poor people in rural areas get the benefits.

The report said urban poverty rate declined to 19.3 percent in 2016 from 21.3 percent in 2010.

Under the existing OMS programme, the government sells coarse rice at Tk 30 a kg and flour at Tk 18 a kg in trucks.

Under the special OMS initiative, the government will sell only coarse rice. For this, the government is likely to allocate about 55,000 tonnes of the coarse rice in two months for the urban poor, said food ministry officials.

They said the target group would be selected with the help from the local public representatives of the city corporations.

At present, the government has a stock of about 16.95 lakh tonnes of food grains in its storage facilities. Of the quantity, rice accounts for about 13.87 lakh tonnes, according to the ministry sources.

The storage is at a satisfactory level, and there is enough stock of food grains, says the ministry.



A man, trying to distribute food items among the poor near LabAid Hospital in the capital, is overwhelmed by rickshaw pullers and homeless people yesterday. The 10-day shutdown to slow coronavirus spread has hit the people of low income group particularly hard.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Shutdown to be stretched to Apr 9

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Hasina added: "Everything can't be stopped. The essential things will remain in operation. But all the educational institutions such as schools and colleges will remain closed till April 9."

The premier, however, opined for keeping open the industries by taking all precautionary measures. "We've to keep the industries open for producing many [essential] things."

She said the holidays would have to be extended to stem the outbreak of Covid-19 in the villages as many people have already gone to their village homes soon after the announcement of the 10-day general holiday.

"We will have to take the quarantine period into consideration so that this lethal virus can't spread," the PM said.

The government on March 23 had declared a nationwide 10-day holiday from March 26 to April 4 shutting down government and private offices except essential and healthcare facilities over the Covid-19 situation.

All were requested to stay at home during the holidays unless they have to buy essentials such as food and get medical and healthcare services.

Kitchen markets, food shops, pharmacies, hospitals and all emergency services remain opened.

The premier warned against any corruption and irregularity in distribution of foods among the destitute people, particularly the day labourers.

"No corruption and irregularity in this regard will be tolerated anymore. We will not spare anyone, whoever he or she might be, involved in doing so to be rich or wealthy capitalising on the bad time of the people."

She asked all to be alert to this end.

The PM also ordered preparing a separate list of the people, such day labourers, rickshaw pullers, transport workers, and tea-stall vendors, who are out of the social safety network programmes to reach essentials to them so that none remains hungry due to the shutdown.

"I am requesting all, including the deputy commissioners [DCs], to work accordingly... It must be ensured that no one remains hungry," she continued.

The premier instructed the authorities concerned to ensure that none is left out of the list. She said

food distribution would have to be made in a coordinated way and it must be ensured that no single person can get food again and again.

She also asked the authorities to ensure additional allocation of foods to meet the growing demand. She said there is no scarcity of food in the country as there is enough stock.

Hasina urged all, particularly the affluent people, to join hands with the government to this end.

She also directed all to celebrate the Pahela Baishakh, the first day of the Bangla New Year, digitally without creating any mass gatherings, in line with the government's "stay-at-home" guideline.

"But it is a matter of sorrow that we have to stop the celebration this time due to coronavirus situation. We have stopped it considering the welfare of the people."

In this context, the premier said that the government suspended all the programmes of the "Mujib Year" marking the birth centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the programmes on the occasions of the Independence Day and the historic March 7 because of the Covid-19 situation and observed the programmes in a different way.

She said there was no need to use the personnel protection equipment (PPE) by all except the health workers, nurses and physicians who are entrusted with giving treatment to the people infected by the coronavirus.

She asked the authorities to create awareness about the use of PPE.

The PM asked the public representatives and others concerned to take necessary measures to check the mosquito menace.

Hasina said there is a possibility that the mosquito menace may begin in the summer and the monsoon, and the situation may aggravate further if "dengue adds to corona".

"So, you'll have to take steps from now on to protect the people from the mosquitoes," she said.

In this connection, the premier advised the people to use mosquito nets while sleeping.

Hasina instructed the agriculture minister to take necessary measures to boost agricultural production.

"Many countries of the world are likely to face shortage of food due to the coronavirus pandemic, and at that time we may have to supply foods.

So, we've to give attention to this end from now on."

The PM asked all to make sure that no arable land is left out of the cultivation programme.

In reply, Agriculture Minister Abdur Razzaque said they directed the officers and employees concerned not to go home and help continue agricultural production.

Noting that there was no shortage of food in the country, the minister hoped that more Boro crops would be harvested this year than the previous season.

The premier said the world is going to witness an economic recession due to the coronavirus pandemic, and its impact may fall on Bangladesh too.

"Hence, from now on we'll have to take measures to face this impact," she said.

About the continuation of production in mills and factories during this period, Hasina said their production could be continued through discussion and maintaining health safety of the workers and employees.

While exchanging views with public representatives and officials of Sylhet district, the PM said the tea workers could continue their work by maintaining (social) distancing among themselves.

She asked all concerned to ensure the supply of essentials to keep their prices under control.

Regarding the law and order, the premier said, "Law enforcers must be made aware to maintain law and order. Special attention should be given so that none can commit crimes taking advantage of this bad time."

The premier thanked the civil and military officials for making their best efforts in fighting the coronavirus, saying, "The situation of Bangladesh is well in comparison to many developed countries due to the efforts of all."

She once again called upon the people not to panic over the coronavirus issue as her government has successfully tackled several disasters in the past.

The PM asked all not to pay heed to any rumours being spread on social media.

Urging all not to spread any rumour, she directed the authorities concerned to take punitive actions against those involved in this crime.

Lax enforcement

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tested. Those who will be tested positive for the virus must be kept in isolation.

"I think the shutdown should be extended for at least two weeks."

On March 23, the government announced closure of all public and private offices from March 26 to April 4 to contain the spread of the virus.

Hospitals, kitchen markets, drug stores, media outlets and emergency services remained outside the purview of the closure.

Besides, people were advised not to go out of their home unless they need to collect food, medicines or receive treatment.

The following day, the government decided to suspend all public transport services, inching closer to enforcing a lockdown.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said the shutdown might be extended till April 9. In that case, offices will reopen on April 12 after weekly holidays on April 10 and 11.

Following the announcement on March 23, people in droves left the capital for their village homes, ignoring the government advice to stay at home.

Dhaka wore a deserted look.

CHANGING SCENARIO

In the last two days, people's movement increased in the capital in compared to the previous days of the shutdown.

The number of cars on roads also rose.

Although there was hardly any crowd on the main thoroughfares, many thronged the alleys.

Visiting different areas in the city, including in Jhigatola, Hajiribagh, Chankharpul and Mirbagh, these correspondents saw locals gathering at tea stalls and other small shops, which are supposed to remain closed.

In Farmgate, Nakhla para, Rayerbazar, West Dhanmondi and Rajabazar areas, people were seen thronging kitchen markets without wearing any sorts of safety gears and without maintaining social distancing.

Although there was some circles marked in front of many shops, people bothered least to stand in them while buying commodities.

Around 10:30am yesterday, some 10 people, all in their 40s, were seen standing and talking with each other at an alley in Kalunagar area of Hazaribagh area.

Only three of them wore masks.

When one of these correspondents asked them why they came out of their home, one of the men named Shamshul Alam said, "Yes we fear the virus, but how long we can stay at home?"

There was a tea stall nearby where five to six people were sitting and gossiping. Yards away, several children were seen playing.

Around 2:00pm yesterday, The Daily Star correspondents saw several hundred poor people gathering in front of Ward-14 councillor's office near Hajiribagh Tannery Intersection. They were waiting to get some food.

"We've been waiting for several hours here since morning. We are coming here for the last three days, but are yet to get any assistance," said Safura Khatun, a domestic help.

Without wearing any safety gears and maintaining safety distance, they were seen standing very close with each other.

Asked, Khalilur Rahman, personal assistance of the ward councillor, Mohammad Selim, said as per the instruction of mayor of Dhaka South City Corporation Sayeed Khokon, they prepared a list of 500 poor people who are supposed to get food assistance from the DSCC.

"We submitted the list to the mayor office but we are yet to receive any assistance for distributing it among the destitute," Khalilur said while talking at the councillor's office.

Khalilur said they sought assistance from the local police station to avoid such crowd as it poses health risk. But police failed to drive them away from the spot.

Our correspondents from Lalmonirhat, Noakhali, Dinajpur, Tangail, Khulna and Barishal reported similar situation there. People, especially in the countryside, gathered at different markets in the afternoon and gossiped for hours, they said.

Contacted, Sohel Rana, assistant inspector general of Police (media) at the Police Headquarters, said two lakh police members were working across the country to implement the government instructions regarding coronavirus, upholding human rights and abiding by the law.

"There were some allegations against a few police members of doing excesses and the police high-ups took it seriously so that all police personnel can carry out their duty showing respect to the country's citizens," he told The Daily Star last night.

"We will make people cautious and make them understand that they should stay at home for the safety of their own and others," Sohel Rana added.