

Turned away by 4 hospitals, boy dies

UNB, Khulna

A schoolboy who was suffering from cirrhosis died without treatment on Tuesday afternoon after he was turned away by three hospitals and a clinic in Khulna.

Deceased Rifat, son of Mohammad Kashem, was from Khalishpur housing bihari camp-1 in Khulna city.

He was taken to Khulna Medical College Hospital (KMCH) around 2:30pm after his condition deteriorated.

Rifat's grandfather Kalimuddin said, "The hospital refused to admit him saying there was no doctor."

He was given medicine and the family was asked to bring him there yesterday.

Later, Rifat was taken to Khalispur Clinic but was denied admission

there, prompting the family members to take him to Surgical Hospital.

Doctors there advised the family members to take the schoolboy to Moylapota Hospital, but he was denied admission there as well.

He died in the evening without receiving any treatment, said Kalimuddin.

Dr Sheikh Atiar Rahman, assistant director of KMCH, said their doctors were under pressure over the coronavirus situation. But the situation was not so severe that general patients would not get proper treatment, he added.

He said he would look into the complaint of the patient's family.

Khulna Civil Surgeon Dr Sujat said treatment of general patients was not stopped at any hospital. He said he would look into the matter.

Russian plane heads to US with supplies for virus fight

AFP, Moscow

A Russian military plane carrying medical equipment has departed for the United States, the defence ministry in Moscow said yesterday, as the Kremlin flexes its soft power amid the coronavirus pandemic.

The Antonov-124, "with medical masks and medical equipment on board", left for the US overnight, a statement said, without providing further details.

Video released by the ministry showed the cargo plane loaded with boxes preparing to take off from a military airbase near Moscow early yesterday morning.

Contacted by AFP, the defence ministry refused to provide any further information on the delivery, which came after Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke with US counterpart Donald Trump on Monday.

Russia has previously sent medical

supplies and experts to coronavirus-hit Italy as part of a humanitarian effort that analysts said carried geopolitical overtones.

Moscow said the aid for Italy included some 100 virus specialists with experience dealing with Ebola and swine fever, but Italian media have reported that much of the aid was not useful in the fight against the virus.

Last month, Russia said it had sent nearly 1,000 coronavirus testing kits to ex-Soviet states and countries including Iran and North Korea.

The US now has 188,663 confirmed coronavirus cases, by far the highest of any country, according to a Johns Hopkins tally, and more than 4,000 deaths.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said on Tuesday that Putin expected the US to return the gesture if Russia faces a similar crisis and US producers have increased their capacity to produce medical supplies.

Shutdown now extended

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a notification suspending all programmes to celebrate the Bangla Noboborsho to avoid public gatherings. Baisabi, the prime festival celebrated in the CHT region marking the Bangla new year, has also been suspended.

EMERGENCY, UTILITY SERVICES WILL REMAIN OPEN

As per the latest circular of public administration ministry, utility services such as water, electricity, gas, fire service, telephone, the internet will remain open during the shutdown.

Agriculture products, fertiliser, insecticides, foods, goods, medical

equipment, daily essentials, kitchen markets, restaurants, drug stores and hospitals would also remain out of the purview of the shutdown, the circular added.

The circular also read that offices can be opened for urgent necessities. Pharmaceuticals and export-oriented mills and factories will remain open if necessary.

Operation of rail, buses and other transport would start gradually for the sake of people's livelihood.

Bangladesh Bank would issue necessary directives to keep banks open on a limited scale for the sake of people during the shutdown.

Govt to help affected SMEs

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The majority of the SMEs are cottage-based, which account for 40 per cent of the total employed population of 6.08 crore.

As a whole, the SMEs contribution to Bangladesh's GDP is 20.25 percent, according to a study conducted by the International Cooperation Organisation for Small and Medium Enterprises in Asia (ICOSA), Japan.

An assistance of sorts was offered to them on March 19, when Bangladesh Bank asked banks not to consider borrowers as defaulters if they fail to repay instalments until June 30 this year. But their accounts will continue to accrue interest during the period.

Tapan said there is a plan to form a separate fund similar to the Export Development Fund, managed by the central bank, to support SMEs.

In addition, export-oriented industries will also be given support so that they can recoup losses amid the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic that have so far claimed more than 42,000 lives globally.

The government will provide the support in addition to its previously announced Tk 5,000 crore fund for export-oriented factories for paying wages of workers.

At a high-level meeting presided over by Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi yesterday, top officials discussed ways of keeping the supply chain of essentials uninterrupted to prevent mismatch between supply and demand as well as price fluctuations between production zones and urban areas.

They also had a discussion on the risk of shortage of commodities in the market owing to a lack of transport as many trucks are staying off the road for fear of coronavirus and a lack of security, said meeting sources.

At the meeting, a decision was taken to alert the law enforcement agencies to ensure seamless movement of goods throughout the country and curb scope of extortion.

Besides, intelligence agencies would be asked to be vigilant to prevent hoarding of goods by unscrupulous traders or businesses, they said.

The meeting was attended by Cabinet Secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam, Chief of Army Staff General Aziz Ahmed, Prime Minister's Principal Secretary Ahmad Kaikaus, NBR Chairman Abu Hena Mohammad Rahmatul Munim, Finance Secretary

Abdur Rouf Talukder, Commerce Secretary Jafar Uddin, Bangladesh Bank Governor Fazle Kabir and leaders of the business community.

Later, Tipu told this newspaper that if any garment factory has work orders from international retailers or global brands, it can continue operation by ensuring adequate health safety measures for its workers.

About the meeting, he said it was a coordination meeting between government high-ups, the army chief and business leaders for assessing the current situation.

The minister said there is confusion about operation of garment factories as the government announced holidays from March 26 to April 11.

Some factory owners are keeping their production units open while some others are keeping their units shut because of confusion, he mentioned.

"There is no confusion. If any factory has work orders from international retailers or brands, it can run its operation," Tipu said.

In separate statements last Friday, the Department of Inspection for Factory and Establishment, and Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association said factories can be kept open with adequate safety measures for workers.

The minister yesterday said some businesspeople want to export Personal Protective Equipment as they have been producing a lot of those recently. The ministry will decide on this later.

The exporters demanded an extension of the repayment period for the Tk 5,000 crore stimulus package. The government gave them 24 months, including six-month grace period, for paying back the money.

"We heard them. We will discuss all the issues soon and reach a decision," Tipu told this newspaper over the phone after the meeting.

He urged house owners to reduce rents for workers at this time of crisis.

The minister further said the state-run Trading Corporation of Bangladesh has started selling some essentials, including edible oil, lentil and sugar, at low prices across the country.

There is no possibility of a sudden price hike of these goods in the upcoming Ramadan as the country has an adequate stock of basic commodities, he added.



Policemen stop motorists in front of New Market in the capital yesterday and ask them why they had left home despite the risks of contracting and spreading coronavirus.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

One more dies of coronavirus

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who suspect that they have contracted the virus, come for tests."

So far, Covid-19 tests have been conducted at six laboratories in Dhaka and one outside Dhaka.

Of them, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University has set up a "fever clinic" for patients showing Covid-19-like symptoms. There will be also test facilities.

The minister added that the government was preparing more hospitals outside Dhaka for treating Covid-19 patients.

"We have increased the number of personal protective equipment and masks [for healthcare professionals]," he added.

Organised by the Directorate General of Health Services, Habibur Rahman, director of DGHS's management information system (MIS), and Khondoker Mahbuba Jamil, virologist at the Institute of Public Health, joined the briefing from the MIS conference room.

Meanwhile, Health Secretary Ashadul Islam said the number of tests would be increased within days.

He said this while briefing the media via video conferencing from DGHS's management information system (MIS) office after a high-profile meeting at the Prime Minister's Office yesterday.

Director General of DGHS was also present at the briefing.

"The prime minister has directed us to increase the number of tests as early as possible. You will see it within days," the health secretary said.

Representatives from different

government and professional bodies attended the meeting.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina urged people to follow the government advice to stay at home. She also urged doctors not to refuse any patients in fear of Covid-19, the health secretary added.

FIVE DIE WITH FLU-LIKE SYMPTOMS

At least five people have died after showing coronavirus-like symptoms in Dhaka, Narail, Shariatpur, and Rajshahi since Tuesday night.

Two people, suffering from fever, runny nose, and cough, died at the isolation unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

The victims are male. One of them, aged 65, passed away around 5:00 yesterday and another, aged 32, around 10:30pm on Tuesday.

"They were admitted to the isolation unit with fever, runny nose, and cough on Tuesday. After their death, samples were sent to IEDCR to know whether they had coronavirus infections," said Alauddin Al Azad, an assistant director at the DMCH.

Their bodies were kept at the hospital

morgue, he said, adding that the bodies would be handed over to their relatives if the victims' samples tested negative for the novel coronavirus.

In Narail, a 26-year-old man, suffering from fever and breathing problems, died at Narail General Hospital on Tuesday night.

He was a betel nut trader at Rugpanj Bazar.

Five families in Cherag Ali Bepari Kandi village of Shariatpur's Naria were isolated yesterday after a man of the area breathed his last at the isolation

unit of Shariatpur Sadar Hospital at that night.

The victim had fever and cough, said Joyanti Rupa Roy, Naria upazila nirbahi officer.

A college student with respiratory disease died at Rajshahi Medical College Hospital on the same night.

The victim, of Nobinagar village in Natore's Lalpur, was a student of Ishwardi Government College.

Talking to journalists, hospital's doctor Azizul Haque said the youth was not infected with coronavirus.

Besides the five families in Shariatpur, multiple families were isolated in Noakhali and Jashore as patients showing Covid-19-like symptoms were reported.

In Noakhali, six people, including three children, of two families were taken to the isolation unit at Sonaimuri Upazila Health Complex, suspecting that they had coronavirus infections.

They were suffering from fever and cold, said Mainul Islam, upazila health officer of Sonaimuri.

They became sick after coming in contact with a Dubai returnee, the doctor added.

Three members of a family of Pachpota village in Jashore's Keshabpur were sent to the isolation unit at the local upazila health complex as they had fever, cold, and cough.

In another development, a government official in Brahmanbaria's Bancharampur was sent to IEDCR yesterday for test as he was suffering from flu-like symptoms.

Our correspondents from Bagerhat, Noakhali, Benapole, and Brahmanbaria contributed to this report.

3,000 in jail could be out on bail

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prisoners are awaiting trial or have been sentenced to imprisonment for two years or less.

"There are around 3,090 people who are in jail for minor offences and we have sent their names to the ministry," he said.

The AIG said they would not consider non-bailable cases like those over murder, rape, terrorism and drugs offences.

Once approved by the home ministry, the proposal will be forwarded to the law ministry. It will be placed before courts for final approval if the law ministry does not have any objection.

"The decision on bail will ultimately be taken by the judiciary as the matter falls within its jurisdiction," said Abrar.

Law Minister Anisul Huq could not be reached for comments.

Public health specialists have expressed concern that many prisoners might contract coronavirus in the densely populated jails plagued by unhealthy and unhygienic living conditions.

Sources at the prison directorate said there are around 89,000 prisoners at 68 jails across the country, against the capacity of 41,244.

In this regard, some legal experts opined that under trial prisoners who might be sentenced to imprisonment for two years or less should be released as it would lower chances of coronavirus transmission in jails.

Until Saturday, no coronavirus

positive cases were reported at any of the jails. Forty inmates have, however, been kept in quarantine at different jails as a precautionary measure, according to a report, signed by Abdul Kadir, a deputy secretary of the home ministry.

The jails are being kept under strict vigilance to prevent the spread of the virus, he said.

Isolation centres have been opened at the jails in Kishoreganj, Madaripur, Pirojpur, Sylhet, Feni and Dinajpur, according to a report of the home ministry's special coordination cell.

Contacted, Attorney General Mahbubey Alam told The Daily Star yesterday that the magistrates concerned can grant bail to under trial prisoners who might be punished with short jail sentences, by examining relevant files in their (magistrates) offices.

Such under-trial prisoners should be released immediately from jail as their family members were anxious about their safety amid the coronavirus outbreak, he said.

Mahbubey Alam also said the magistrates can work on this at their offices as courts are now closed due to the virus outbreak and bail petitions are not being heard or disposed of.

The government may also release such under-trial prisoners on parole from jail for a short period of time, he added.

Eminent jurist Dr Shahdeen Malik told this correspondent that "the idea of taking revenge on alleged perpetrators

of a crime is very strong in our criminal justice system.

"Like most other countries, we should also move away from this perception. The government should, first, release all convicted prisoners who have been sentenced to imprisonment for two years or less. Secondly, those who are in jails as under trial prisoners for more than two years, being accused of crimes not punishable by sentence of life imprisonment or death, should also be freed.

"Also, all cases of women prisoners should be sympathetically looked into in order to facilitate their release."

Shahdeen Malik also said "these measures will substantially reduce burden and backlog of bailable cases and will also help stem the ongoing outbreak of Covid-19 in the overcrowded prisons".

Advocate Khurshid Alam Khan, a Supreme Court lawyer and editor of Dhaka Law Reports, told this correspondent that the chief justice may constitute two High Court benches and assign some magistrates to hear the urgent bail petitions as the court functions are now closed.

"As far as I know, around 300 accused get bail on every working day from courts and a similar number of people are arrested every day across the country on an average. Now that the bail petitions are not being heard, the Supreme Court Bar Association may approach the chief justice for this purpose," he added.

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emerging as the epicentre of the US outbreak.

Mayor Bill de Blasio said Tuesday the city was tripling hospital capacity in a bid to get ready for the peak of the pandemic expected in two to three weeks.

"(We) will require a level of hospital capacity we've never seen... never even conceived of," he told NBC.

PLEA TO EVACUATE

Fallout is spreading wider every day across the world's biggest economy.

The captain of the nuclear powered aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt, one of the most fearsome assets in the US arsenal, pleaded for large-scale evacuation, saying that the virus was spreading uncontrollably through his crew, currently in the US Pacific territory of Guam.

"We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die," Captain Brett Crozier wrote in a letter to his superiors, US

media reported. Defense Secretary Mark Esper later downplayed the drama, saying that no one was "seriously ill."

But in New York, officials are already in full blown crisis management mode, scrambling to deal with the influx of sick when hospitals are already overwhelmed and medical supplies strained.

South of Central Park, the Javits Convention Center is now operational with nearly 3,000 beds after it was adapted by the Army Corps of Engineers.

It will take non-Covid-19 patients to ease the burden on hospitals focusing on the virus.

A few blocks away at Pier 90 sits the white, imposing US navy hospital ship Comfort, with 1,000 beds and 12 operating rooms -- also for non-coronavirus patients.

A 350-bed facility at the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center

SHUTDOWN

Army to go tough on violators

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The army will take stern actions from today if anyone violates the government directive on maintaining social distancing and following home-quarantine rules, in its efforts to contain the spread of coronavirus.

"To assist the local administration, the army will strictly ensure social distancing and home quarantine at all places of the country from tomorrow [today]," said a press release from the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) last night.

"Strict actions would be taken against those who would violate the directives given by the government," it added.

The move came following media reports that many are still roaming on streets and alleyways in cities and other urban areas, ignoring the government advice to stay indoors.

On March 23, the government announced closure of all public and private offices from March 26 to April 4 as part of its efforts to contain the spread of novel coronavirus. Yesterday, it extended the closure up to April 11.

From March 24, the army, following a government announcement, started assisting the local administration at divisional cities and district towns in ensuring social distancing and implementing other precautionary measures.

The army, in coordination with district magistrates, would monitor the treatment of corona patients and the quarantine facilities for suspected cases in districts and divisions, the announcement said.

They will also monitor whether any person returning from abroad is neglecting the mandatory self-quarantine rules, it added.

A total of 496 teams of the army took part in various activities with local administration in 62 districts of the country to prevent the spread of coronavirus, according to an ISPR statement issued on Tuesday.

The navy is also assisting the civil administration in coastal areas while the air force was engaged in carrying medical supplies to hospitals and other emergency transportation, said the ISPR.

Free transport for doctors, nurses launched in city

UNB, Dhaka

A free transport service for caregivers, including doctors and nurses, was launched yesterday so that they could go to hospitals faster.

A number of busses and minibuses have been arranged to pick up doctors and nurses from their homes and drop them at hospitals in three shifts -- at 8am, 2pm and 8pm.

Apart from the scheduled shuttle services, transport will also be provided to doctors and nurses in case of emergency calls within the capital, said a press release.

Under the supervision of Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), non-governmental organisation 'The Earth Society' and vehicle IT solution firm 'Bondstein Technologies' jointly took the initiative with support of DBL Pharmaceuticals Ltd and Dhaka Hub of Global Shapers.

The service was named as 'Crack Platoon Transport Service' inspired by the famous guerrilla unit named 'Crack Platoon' that had conducted a number of heroic commando operations in Dhaka during the War of Liberation in 1971.

Over 250 doctors and caregivers have so far registered in the website for availing themselves of the service and any doctor or caregiver in need of the service can register through the website - bit.ly/crackplatoontransport and can call at the hotline number - 09639595959.

We are with you

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to spread panic. Our objective is to inform you of the situation as it is and help you prepare with the correct and up-to-date information.

The responsibility of the news media now is greater than ever before. At the same time, the industry is under tremendous strain because of the adverse effects of the coronavirus, with a major shortfall in revenue. The distribution and marketing channels of the newspapers countrywide are being disrupted. Despite that, we have continued to publish newspapers considering the greater public interest. We have brought our workstations and printing houses under the emergency health protocol, provided our journalists with protective equipment, and distributed masks, gloves and hand sanitisers among our agents and hawkers across the country including the capital Dhaka.

We acknowledge the profound need for unity, friendship and cooperation in this period of crisis. Only through this do we stand a chance to overcome this crisis.

Dear reader, we in the news media are with you, as we expect you will be with us.