

WB approves \$100m for Bangladesh to fight Covid-19

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The World Bank has approved a fast-track \$100 million financing to help Bangladesh prevent, detect, and respond to the coronavirus pandemic and strengthen its national system for public health emergencies.

The Covid-19 Emergency Response and Pandemic Preparedness Project will be rolled out nationwide to help upgrade selected health facilities and laboratories to detect, manage and treat suspected and confirmed Covid-19 cases and support screening in Bangladesh's designated health facilities and entry points, said a release of the global lender on Friday.

The project will benefit people with suspected and confirmed infections, at-risk populations, medical and emergency personnel, as well as public and private service providers, medical and testing facilities, and the national health system.

"The World Bank is working closely with the government of Bangladesh to fight the spread of Covid-19," said Mercy Tembon, WB country director for Bangladesh and Bhutan.

She said the project would support the implementation of Bangladesh's national plan to respond to the pandemic. It would help strengthen the country's response by ensuring that effective surveillance and diagnostic systems were in place and that medical supplies, personal protective equipment, ventilators and isolation units were available in designated hospitals, she added.

The project will equip designated laboratories with Covid-19 trained staff as well as diagnostic equipment, test kits, and reagents, said the release.

It is mobilising resources for faster procurement to expedite the acquisition of critical items.

To deliver critical medical support and cope with the increased demand

for services, the project will rehabilitate district-level health facilities, selected medical college hospitals, the Infectious Diseases Hospital, and the Bangladesh Institute of Tropical and Infectious Diseases, among others.

It will help set up new isolation wards and ramp up intensive care units, provide personal protective equipment, medical equipment including ventilators, and medicines in designated hospitals.

The project will also help improve medical waste management and disposal, and water and sanitation systems in the designated health facilities.

The project is financed from the International Development Association (IDA), the WB's fund for the poorest countries. The credit has a 30-year maturity, including a five-year grace period.

WB GROUP COVID-19 RESPONSE
The World Bank Group is rolling out a \$14 billion fast-track package to strengthen the Covid-19 response in developing countries and shorten the time to recovery, said another WB release on Thursday.

The immediate response includes financing, policy advice and technical assistance to help countries cope with the health and economic impacts of the pandemic.

The International Finance Corporation (IFC) is providing \$8 billion in financing to help private companies affected by the pandemic and preserve jobs. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and IDA are making an initial \$6 billion available for the health-response.

As countries need broader support, the WB Group will deploy up to \$160 billion over 15 months to protect the poor and vulnerable, support businesses, and bolster economic recovery, said the release.

Tests ramped

FROM PAGE 1

The number of phone calls and the number of tests in a day prove that "things are not being done correctly", he said.

"They received 70,000 calls [yesterday], but tested very few," Prof Nazrul said.

He said people who get tested should be selected in a planned manner so that the data can represent the entire country.

Of the latest 434 tests, the IEDCR conducted 136 and found 8 positive, and rest 13 laboratories across the country found one positive. Of the 13 laboratories, eight are in the capital and five outside.

LABORATORY CAPACITIES

Real-Time Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) test has proven to be the most dependable method of diagnosing Covid-19.

Invented in 1983 by the American biochemist Kary Mullis, the test involves a sophisticated procedure requiring trained personnel for collecting and transporting samples, and doing the examinations and analyses, experts said.

Rigorous tests have paved the way for controlling the Covid-19 outbreak in several countries.

Experts said maintaining the standard of tests is a challenge.

According to officials, the government is working to increase the number of tests by next week.

Hunger sets in at slums

FROM PAGE 1

bags full of fish to share with her neighbours.

Ever since the crisis struck, Nurjahan's son and daughter have been laid off, and her rickshaw puller husband cannot find passengers. And just like that, a family that used to have some spare change to enjoy the little pleasures of life, have no idea where the next meal will come from.

At Damalkote slum, two sisters -- also house-cleaners who work by the hour -- cannot bring themselves to run after relief trucks. The two sisters are both widows and live together alone.

"The trucks throw out food and we have to fight for the food with others. We are not beggars. We did not beg even when our husbands died. We work for our food," said Halima Begum.

She and her sister Rowshanara Begum bought a fistful of lentils with Tk 10 three days ago, and have been stretching that out by cooking the thinnest gruel possible.

Mariam Begum's 9-year-old twins Mukta and Saiful are constantly hungry and there is nothing to eat at home, so the mother brought them over to Bhashantek kitchen market to beg. The two children ran up to whoever they saw, crying for food. Mariam too is a domestic help whose services are no longer needed as the city's residents started social distancing.

"They ask for food all day long. There is none. If they can beg and

Of the 14 testing facilities, different laboratories have different capabilities.

"The laboratories are capable of conducting a total of around 5,000 Covid-19 tests every day," Prof Dr Khondoker Mahbuba Jamil, virologist at the Institute of Public Health told The Daily Star yesterday.

To collect samples from suspected Covid-19 patients in every upazila, the Directorate General of Health Services has assigned sample collectors and trained them. Employees of Surveillance and Immunization medical Officers Network (SIMO) and medical technologists in the upazila health complexes do the job.

Personal protective equipment (PPE) have been supplied to them, according to officials.

THE CHALLENGES

If anybody wants to be tested, the only way to reach the authorities is to make phone calls to the hotline numbers of the IEDCR and the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

In the 24 hours until 10:00am yesterday, the IEDCR's 17 employees received 3,089 calls while DGHS's 2,118 and volunteering doctors received 63,714.

Of them, only 553 were suspected as potential Covid-19 patients.

Many people complained of failing to reach the IEDCR timely.

earn some money, I can buy food for them," said Mariam.

At home, a disabled husband and son along with three other small children were waiting for her to fill the pot. Her neighbour Safia Begum too waited by the roadside, hoping for alms to turn up.

"The shopkeepers are refusing to give groceries on credit anymore. The savings associations are not giving us loans. My husband worked in a factory in Jatrabari and they laid him off," she said. People of her slum are now selling off their household possessions to buy food, she added.

A crowd of people waited for relief in front of the Mirpur-14 slum on Thursday afternoon. A police car drove up to the people, and started handing out packs, but as hungry crowds pressed against the car, it quickly drove off leaving many empty-handed. One of those left with her hopes dashed was Sabina Khatun, a day labourer who breaks bricks into chips for a living. There has been no work for 20 days and her family consists of a sick husband and two children, all of whom are waiting with hungry stomachs.

"I have no work, no food and no fear of the coronavirus," she declared defiantly, sitting down on the sidewalk to wait for alms. That there is their predicament -- the city that had drawn the whole country to it like fireflies to a light, and given them hopes of a new life, has nothing to offer now.



An elderly woman being taken home from hospital in a rickshaw amid acute transport shortage in Chattogram. The photo was taken in Tiger Pass area yesterday afternoon.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Every MP still not on board

FROM PAGE 1

awareness about COVID-19.

The prime minister issued a clear directive that only physicians, nurses, and attendants of patients will use personal protective equipment (PPE). There is reportedly a huge shortage of PPE in the country.

However, Shamima Akter Khanam, an AL lawmaker from reserved seat, has been working in the district.

In the last month, two Manikganj lawmakers -- AM Naimur Rahman Durjoy, a former national cricketer, and acclaimed singer Momtaz Begum -- visited their constituencies for the first time on Friday. The district, in Dhaka division, has three parliamentary seats.

Health Minister Zahid Maleque, a lawmaker from Manikganj-3, last visited the constituency on March 1. However, he is currently busy with issues related to the coronavirus outbreak.

In the northern district of Lalmonirhat, two out of its three MPs have not visited their constituencies since the outbreak began.

The two lawmakers -- Social Welfare Minister Nuruzzaman Ahmed and Jatiya Party Chairman GM Quader -- did not go to their areas while the third MP, Motaahar Hossain, is now in his locality, reports our district correspondent.

However, Quader was seen distributing food in the capital.

In Kurigram, MP Panir Uddin Ahamed has been in his locality for many days now while Zakir Hossain, also state minister for primary and mass education, went to his constituency on Friday.

Neither of the two Jhalakathi MPs --

Sudden influx

FROM PAGE 1

announced a 10-day shutdown from March 26, closing government and private offices, to stem the spread of coronavirus. The shutdown was later extended till April 11.

"I came from Faridpur. I had to board different vehicles to reach my office," said Jamal Hossain, 30, an operator at a garment factory in Savar on the outskirts of the capital. He said he was asked to join work from today.

Jamal said he was told that salaries might be disbursed within a couple of days. "So I did not make any delay. I need the money."

Many other readymade garments workers echoed the statement.

Amirul Haque Amin, president of National Garment Workers Federation, said factory workers were coming back to their workplaces mainly for two reasons -- they don't want to be terminated and they need their salaries.

Usually, the salaries are paid after the seventh of each month and those workers desperately need the money, especially to buy food and pay house rent.

He, however, said the safety of the workers must be given the top priority as the virus may spread fast among them as they would be working in close proximity.

Meanwhile, Nazma Akter, president of the Sammilito Garment Sramik Federation, said many factories were being laid off during this time, showing disregard for the labour law.

"So many workers are losing their jobs. No worker should become jobless," she told The Daily Star over phone.

She opined that the managements should shut down their units for the time being, but should continue paying their workers. "This will help maintain a healthy working environment in the sector."

In an audio message yesterday, Rubana Huq said the BGMEA wanted to ensure

Amir Hossain Amu and Bazlul Haque Haroon -- has recently visited their constituencies.

In Barishal, lawmaker Zahid Faruk Shamim, also state minister for water resources, went to his area for two days last week and visited Sher-E-Bangla Medical College Hospital to supervise treatment facilities.

Pankaj Debnath, another MP, distributed food among the poor for a brief period but three other MPs were not seen in their constituencies, reports our Barishal correspondent.

In Khulna, three lawmakers were in the field for one day; two other MPs are working in their localities, and the other MP is sick.

Another Khulna MP is staying at home and not allowing anyone near his residence in fear of the virus, reports our district correspondent.

In Dinajpur, two MPs -- Manoranjan Shil Gopal and Shibli Saddeeq -- are now in their areas and taking part in relief distribution while four others have not visited their localities so far.

Out of six Brahmanbaria MPs, only two -- Bodruddoza Md Farhad Hossain and AB Tajul Islam -- were seen in their constituencies.

MORAL OBLIGATION

Transparency International Bangladesh's Executive Director Dr Iftekharuzzaman said time to prove their worth as public representatives is now more than ever.

"From both political and ethical points of view they are expected to take part in helping social distancing as well as distribution of supplies and other support that the people need most,

especially the most disadvantaged."

Public representatives have the capacity, authority and responsibility to take this role more than most others, he added.

"It is disappointing that many of them seem to have failed to lead by example which the people expect of them," he told The Daily Star on Thursday.

"Public representatives are also subject to health and safety risks in this extraordinary context, which may be suggested as a justification for their lesser than expected level of participation in support of respective communities."

However, he said, while it cannot be imposed on anyone, since they claim to be public representatives they should be aware that crises like this is the moment of test of their sense of responsibility to the people to whom they will go back to secure the mandate again, legitimately or not.

Contacted yesterday, Awami League Joint General Secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif said although there are risks, lawmakers should stand by people in their constituencies, taking the necessary health safety measures.

"As public representatives, it's our moral obligation to stand by people during any calamities," said Hanif, also a lawmaker from Kushtia, who is now in his constituency.

Asked whether the party would give any instructions to MPs who are not visiting their areas, Hanif said, "The prime minister is likely to issue directives from a press conference she is going to hold tomorrow [today]."

office.

On the Barishal-Dhaka highway, thousands were seen travelling in trucks and pickup vans. They were sitting close to each other, our Barishal correspondent reported. One of the passengers, Alamgir, 35, said he works at a factory in Dhaka and the factory would reopen today.

Barishal Metropolitan Police's Deputy Commissioner (Traffic) Khairul Hasan said they filed cases against the owners of 12 vehicles for violating traffic rules. "We are trying to make the passengers aware of the necessity of physical distancing."

At Gazipur's Maona intersection on the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway, hundreds of people were seen waiting for vehicles, reports our correspondent in the district.

Many, upon not being able to avail any transportation, started their journey to Dhaka on foot.

Additionally, hundreds of workers, including garments workers from different upazilas of Mymensingh and adjacent Sherpur and Kishoreganj districts, were seen heading towards Dhaka via Mymensingh.

They were seen travelling by auto-rickshaws and human hauliers, reports our Mymensingh correspondent.

Visiting the Dhaka-Aricha highway and the Nabinagar-Chandra highway, our Savar correspondent did not see any public transport. People were being carried in trucks and pickup vans.

Contacted, Tajawar Akram Sakapi Ibn Sajjad, assistant commissioner (Land) in Ashulia Circle, said action would be taken if any truck or pickup carried passengers.

Javed Masud, inspector (investigation) of Ashulia Police Station, said the workers had to return as some factories would reopen.

Police were trying to make everyone maintain social distancing, he said.

related illness there slm on Wednesday.

Doctors say the situation would be unmanageable if a sustained coronavirus outbreak spread rapidly through one of India's many slums, where there is little sanitation or running water and thousands of people live cheek by jowl -- making social distancing physically and economically impossible.

This is the second coronavirus-related death reported in Mumbai's slums since the outbreak began, government officials confirmed with CNN. A 63-year-old man who tested positive for the virus on Tuesday was a resident of Malvani slum area and passed away later that evening.

Doctors in the country told CNN that India needed to prepare for a large-scale community transmission and it

was essential that the public abide by the 21-day national lockdown that was imposed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi last week.

"We are already seeing evidence of it (community transmission). How widespread it is, we don't know," said Trehan.

"My fear is that no matter how much preparation we do, if it peaks, we will not have even a fraction of what we need, by way of beds, by way of ventilators, by way of PPEs (personal protective gear), everything."

Worsening the situation, thousands of migrant workers, who fled India's largest cities to their homes, are left without jobs. Doctors say rural medical infrastructures are utterly inadequate to treat this high risk group.

Licences

FROM PAGE 1

coronavirus-infected patients at Kurmitola General Hospital, according to a press release sent by Mayedul Islam Prodhhan, public relations officer of the ministry.

Stressing the need for maintaining physical distancing, the minister said there is no alternative to fighting the virus but to do so unitedly.

He reiterated that people should not to go out of their residences and urged them to wear masks if they are forced to go out for emergencies.

Regarding people still gathering together on occasions, he said it was being done despite repeated requests against it.

People are even gathering on the roads after Friday prayers, he said, adding it was very unexpected at a time when countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran have banned going to mosques.

The minister added that it will be very difficult to contain the spread of coronavirus if people continue to disobey government directives.

Every breath

FROM PAGE 1

samples from her and she later tested positive for Covid-19.

"I'm not an elderly person and had no respiratory issues. Yet I suffered a lot. Now imagine how hard it is for the elderly people with respiratory and other problems," she said.

She kept herself isolated from her husband and two children -- one six-year-old and the other only two -- at their Hazaribagh home for the next two days.

As her condition deteriorated, she was taken to Kuwait Bangladesh Friendship Government Hospital.

After a week-long treatment there, the nurse tested negative and was released on March 31.

"Every single day felt like a year. My daughters used to call me over the phone and ask me to return home. The separation was painful. At times I cried, wondering when I'd be able to hold and adore them," she said.

The nurse is still physically weak and now staying home.

She said, "I will soon rejoin the hospital and serve people, especially patients with breathing problems, as I can now understand their pain."

It could not be known how she was infected. But her colleagues believed that she contracted the virus from one of the patients at the DMCH.

"The safety situation [at the hospital] was not satisfactory when she got infected. Many doctors, nurses and ward boys were not even provided with masks at that time. The situation, however, has improved now," said a staffer of the DMCH.

Talking to this correspondent, the nurse expressed her gratitude to her family members, colleagues, including DMCH Director Brig Gen AKM Nasir Uddin, and ambulance driver Pradip who supported her during the crisis.

She also thanked the doctors who treated her.

The nurse is among the 30 patients who have recovered from Covid-19. Of the 70 confirmed cases in the country, eight have died so far.

She urged all to maintain social and physical distancing and follow the other directives given by the government and health institutions to stay safe from coronavirus.

BNP wants

FROM PAGE 1

be restored to where it was before the general holidays.

"The current corona crisis is not only a threat to life but also a disaster for the economy. The common and low-income people are the worst sufferers of it. That's why we propose taking short and long-term steps to overcome it," Fakhrul said.

He called upon the well-off section of society to come forward to stand beside the poor, homeless and destitute with food amid the stalemate in economic activities.

The BNP leader also stressed the need to adopt and implement coordinated plans based on a national consensus to overcome the crisis.

He said a specialised hospital should be established to treat the patients infected with contagious diseases like Ebola, Dengue and corona.

He praised the role of the doctors, nurses, journalists, armed forces, law enforcers and other emergency service providers who are working relentlessly to contain the spread of the virus.

Fakhrul said there has been an allegation that people could not get access to IEDCR by calling their hotline numbers.

"According to newspaper reports, some eight lakh people called the dedicated coronavirus hotline numbers in the last two months. IEDCR alone received more than 70,000 calls, but only 1,100 people were tested until March 28 and 48 were found positive."

He alleged that though the World Health Organisation repeatedly asking for testing more and more people, Bangladesh is still among the countries with the lowest test rate.

"On the other hand, if we look at the fatality rate, we see that our fatality rate is higher than devastated Italy," he said, adding that low test rate is the reason behind such figures.