

India's coronavirus relief plan could leave millions without food aid

REUTERS, New Delhi

Tens of millions of Indians stand to see few benefits from a coronavirus relief package worth \$22.6 billion, economists and food rights activists say, a scenario that spells catastrophe for Karan Kumar, a struggling day labourer in the capital.

Living in cramped quarters at a construction site where activity has been halted by a harsh three-week lockdown to stem the spread of the virus, Kumar has been without work for days, unable to earn a daily wage of about \$4.

"I'm not suffering alone, my family is suffering with me," said 32-year-old Kumar, who relies on his earnings to support his wife, five children and ageing parents in his home state of Bihar, one of India's poorest.

"My wife calls up and urges me to get home anyhow," said Kumar, one of 1,500 workers at the site. "She says that even if we are hungry, we will be hungry together."

Don't go out after 6pm

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should not be considered as a regular one and people should strictly follow the directives to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

People must stay at home to be safe and to curb transmission of the virus, it added.

Government officials and employees in divisions, districts, upazilas and unions will have to stay at their workplaces to perform their duties, it said.

People engaged in electricity, water, and gas supply, fire service, cleaning activities, telephone and internet services and the media are exempt from the restrictions.

Transportation of fertilisers, pesticides, newspapers, food items, industrial products, medical equipment, emergency and essential goods are outside the purview of the restrictions.

Kitchen market, food and drug stores are also exempt.

Production at export-oriented factories may continue if they are working to meet deadlines.

The Bangladesh Bank would issue directives on limited-scale banking during the holidays, it said.

"Movement of... trains, buses, rickshaws and vans would be allowed in phases, considering the livelihood of people if the situation improves."

RMG FACTORIES CLOSED UNTIL 25TH

The decision to keep the factories closed was announced in a statement issued by Rubana Huq, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), and AKM Salim Osman, president of Bangladesh

Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA).

The statement was posted in a WhatsApp message group of journalists yesterday.

Any factory owner willing to pay the workers before 25th should inform the BGMEA, BKMEA, and Industrial Police beforehand, it said.

The associations earlier suggested that their member companies disburse the workers' salary of March by April 16.

The factory owners earlier announced that factories would open amid the shutdown, forcing thousands of workers to come to the cities. They returned home after the owners changed their decision following widespread criticism.

SCHOOL CLOSED UNTIL RAMADAN

The educational institutions will remain closed until April 25, said Abul Khair, public relation officer of the education ministry.

Secondary schools may not open until May 30, because of the Ramadan, May Day, Buddha Purnima and Eid-ul-Fitr, he said.

Secondary and Higher Education Division Secretary Mahbub Hossain said, "We may revise our decisions if the situation improves. You will all know."

The first half-yearly exams at primary schools have been suspended due to the shutdown.

The exams were supposed to be held between April 15 and April 23.

"We will take the exams later," Fasiullah, director general of Directorate of Primary Education, said.

Over 1 lakh primary schools, madrasas, and kindergartens have over 1.74 crore students across the country.

to dedicate the unit for Covid-19 patients as the number of such patients is increasing.

The authorities have also been requested to shift the burn unit's patients to nearby Sheikh Hasina National Burn and Plastic Surgery Institute.

Samanta Lal Sen, chief coordinator of the institute, said they received an order.

"We will start shifting the patients tomorrow [today] and try to complete it within the day," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

There are over 500 inpatients in the unit every day against nearly 300 beds.

However, a number of doctors at the DMCH opposed the government's decision, saying that DMCH is the premier hospital where patients from across the country were taken to.

"The hospital is overcrowded with patients. If any portion is dedicated for Covid-19 patients, the virus may spread," said a doctor, preferring anonymity.

Another doctor suggested that the government should reconsider the decision and build a temporary hospital or dedicate the whole hospital for Covid-19 patients.

A health ministry official told this newspaper that they would use the burn unit if the existing dedicated hospitals for Covid-19 patients were overflowed with patients.

He said some doctors were opposing the move as they thought they had to treat the Covid-19 patients.

district from 5:00pm yesterday.

In Noakhali, the local administration yesterday announced that the entire district would be put under lockdown from 6:00am today until further notice.

In Patuakhali, local administration yesterday locked down Dumki upazila until further notice. Besides, three doctors of Patuakhali General Hospital have been kept in quarantine as they came in contact with a Covid-19 infected patient.

In Barguna, the district's Amtoli upazila was locked down from 2:00pm yesterday until further notice.

In Gopalganj, a 21-year-old man and his wife of a village in Birnai union under Tungipara upazila tested positive for coronavirus.

This is the first confirmed case in the district.

In Brahmanbaria, a 65-year-old man tested positive for coronavirus in Nabinagar upazila, the first confirmed case in the district.

In Gazipur, a worker of an agro-feed factory has been tested positive for coronavirus in Dasu Narayanganj area under Kapasia upazila.

Our correspondents from Narayanganj, Dinajpur, Feni, Noakhali, Cumilla, Bogura, Patuakhali, Brahmanbaria, Faridpur and Gazipur contributed to this report.



A medical team of Brahmanbaria's Akhaura upazila health complex collects information about a suspected Covid-19 patient, who died at her in-law's house in Ranikhar village early Thursday, about 10 days after returning from Narayanganj. The team also collected samples from the body of the 40-year-old housewife on Thursday.

PHOTO: STAR

Cash aid for extreme poor

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workers, street hawkers, agricultural and day labourers, porters and domestic helps.

They said the aid programme would be run taking into consideration the Census of Slum Areas and Floating Population 2014, conducted by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

The survey shows there were around 5.95 lakh households in 13,935 slums across the country at that time.

The government plans to transfer cash to 34 lakh poor families as the number of such households in the slums may have increased in the last few years, and there are poor families outside the slum areas as well, mentioned the officials.

Of the slum dwellers, 16.80 percent were rickshaw or rickshaw-van pullers, 14.35 percent garment workers, 14.33 percent were in the service sector, 8.27 percent porters and day labourers, 8.38 percent construction workers, 6.94 percent transport workers, 2.82 percent hotel workers, 2.85 percent domestic helps, and 1.40 percent street hawkers and others, according to the census.

Low income people, especially rickshaw-pullers, domestic helps and day labourers, have already been hit hard by the ongoing shutdown as they have no work.

Yesterday, the ongoing nationwide shutdown was extended till April 25.

Earlier, the government announced closure of all public and private offices from March 26 to April 4, asking people to stay indoors and maintain social distancing. It was later extended till April 14.

Zahid Hussain, former lead economist at the World Bank's Dhaka office, said that without a minimum social assistance, the vulnerable and those who live a hand-to-mouth existence will have no choice but to defy orders.

The finance ministry needs to play a major role in providing cash assistance to the target groups, taking the help of other relevant ministries, parastatal organisations, NGOs and mobile financial services providers, he mentioned.

"While testing testing and testing is the key to fighting Covid-19, governance, governance and governance is the key to delivering assistance to the poor and the vulnerable.

"Justifiably, one may worry about the impact on the prices of essentials after the cash transfers kick in. Inflation generally should not be a concern in the present context if the reliance on deficit monetisation is strictly restricted to the duration of the emergency measures linked to the health crisis," Zahid pointed out.

"What would be important is to ensure that the supply chains of essentials remain functional and the stocks of essentials available in the local markets are adequate. There is an overall contraction in domestic and export demand any way.

"The key priority to focus on now is the mitigation and containment of the virus spread, the consequent deepening of poverty and the specter of hunger," he added.

In an article published in an Indian newspaper recently, noted economists Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, who won the Nobel Prize last year, called for bolder direct benefit transfers to deal with the coronavirus crisis that has left India's poor in the lurch.

"Be much, much bolder with the social transfers schemes. Without that, the demand crisis will snowball into an economic avalanche, and people will have no choice but to defy orders," the duo said.

Their comments came days after the Indian government on March 26 announced a \$22.6 billion economic package to ensure that no one goes hungry during the nationwide coronavirus lockdown.

Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the government would provide food rations and cash transfers for three months to take care of the welfare concerns of poor and suffering workers, and those who need immediate help."

Earlier on March 24, the Pakistan government announced a rescue and stimulus package involving Rs 1.13 trillion to support various segments of society.

Of the amount, Rs 200 billion were allocated for the labour force and Rs 150 billion for vulnerable families.

And major oil producers except Mexico agreed to cut output after a dramatic slump in demand caused by the virus, exacerbated by a Saudi-Russia price war, sent prices crashing to a near two-decade low.

Despite hopeful signs in Western nations and China -- where the virus was first detected late last year -- there are fears the worst is still to come in much of the developing world.

War-torn Yemen, which has been experiencing one of the world's most acute humanitarian crises, yesterday reported its first case.

Brazilian authorities confirmed the first deaths in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, where overcrowding and poor sanitation have raised fears of a catastrophe.

Meanwhile, the UGC in a statement yesterday said their April 6 directive would remain in force until further notice. The commission will issue its next directive regarding the matter after the situation improves.

Shahidullah said private universities can complete classes online, but they have to take exams only after return of normalcy.

"Students should not think about exams in this dangerous situation. Also, not all students have internet connections."

Speaking to The Daily Star, Prof Shahidullah yesterday said, "There is no scope for postponement of such decisions. The situation has not improved since we issued the directive [April 6]. Rather, it has deteriorated."

He said they were readying an answer to the APUB letter. "I discussed the issue with the others UGC members. We all agreed that there is no change in the situation and there is no scope for postponing the decisions. We stand by our earlier decisions. We hope that all private universities will abide by those."

The UGC chief said they would consider reviewing the decisions if the situation improved.

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Experts warned that the numbers would increase well into the next few months and all efforts should be made to flatten the curve.

"We are facing a very difficult time ahead and this situation will prevail for the next couple of months," said Dr Mushtaq Hussain.

"We have to ensure active surveillance among the community and test all with flu-like symptoms. The government alone cannot do that. Communities like housing societies can take the responsibility of making sure that their residents are getting tested," he said.

"Lockdown of neighbourhoods is not the only answer. We have never asked the police to start marking homes with positive cases with red flags. This [marking homes] is creating stigma and resulting in people hiding their disease status, or refusing to get tested," he said.

He added that the way the pandemic has been handled has resulted into social stigma against families of those testing positive. "That is why people are leaving and going to their village homes," he said.

"We have to make sure people have enough to eat. Otherwise, they will get out into the streets looking for food," he said, adding it will only increase the chances of coronavirus transmission.

have failed to keep positive cases in Narayanganj and now they are all over the country," said Flora.

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For now, the only way is up

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coming weeks? What will Bangladesh's epidemic curve look like? Experts say one should look at the countries already into the crisis to search for the answer.

"The number of positive cases may increase by a lot. We can learn from our neighbouring countries," said Dr Mushtaq Hussain, consultant, National Action Plan for Health Security at the Institute of Epidemiology Disease Control and Research (IEDCR).

India's turning point occurred in Week 8 of the crisis -- between March 20 and March 26. The total number of positive cases stood at 694, which was a staggering 359 percent increase from the previous week.

Two weeks later, at this current moment, the cumulative number of positive cases was 6,771, which is 10 times more than the number from their watershed week.

Unlike India, Pakistan did not have much time in hand before things went south. Bangladesh and Pakistan reported their first cases approximately around the same time, but Pakistan's case numbers have seen a meteoric rise from the first week.

From a total of 16 cases the first week, it had 187 cases at the end of Week 2, and all very suddenly that number shot up to 887 by Week 3. As of April 10, the country has 4,489 positive cases with 63 people dead.

The number of positive cases has increased and will continue increasing," she stated.

"In fact, to get a proper sense of how much the number of positive cases has increased, one should look at the tests done at the IEDCR laboratory today. We conducted 196 tests today and results of 53 of them were positive. This is a big proportion when comparing to the numbers of the previous days," she added.

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