

‘Rice ATM’ feeds Vietnam’s poor

REUTERS, Ho Chi Minh City

A Vietnamese entrepreneur in Ho Chi Minh City has invented a 24/7 automatic dispensing machine providing free rice for people out of work following an ongoing nationwide lockdown to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Vietnam has reported 262 Covid-19 cases, and no deaths so far, but as a result of a 15-day social distancing programme that began on March 31 many small businesses have been shuttered and thousands of people temporarily laid off from work.

Nguyen Thi Ly's husband was among those who have lost their job.

"This rice ATM has been helpful. With this one bag of rice, we can have enough for one day," said the 34-year-old mother of three children. "Now, we only need other food. Our neighbors sometimes gave us some leftover food, or we have instant noodles."

The machine distributes a 1.5kg (3.3lb) bagful of rice from a small silo to waiting workers, many of whom are street sellers or people who earned a living from cash-in-hand jobs like housekeeping or selling lottery tickets.

Hoang Tuan Anh, the businessman behind the idea, had initially donated a batch of smart doorbells to hospitals

in Ho Chi Minh City before turning his technological expertise to food distribution.

Similar 'rice ATMs' have been set up in other big cities like Hanoi, Hue and Danang, according to state media.

Employees monitoring the rice ATM declined to comment, but Anh told state media he wanted people to feel they still had access to food and resources, despite the current economic difficulties they found themselves in.

"I refer to this machine as a 'rice ATM' because people can withdraw rice from it, assured that there are still good people out there who want to give them a second chance," he said.

While many in the Communist-ruled country can rely on a social safety-net, and the government has introduced a stimulus package designed to help society's most vulnerable, some people living on the margin, like Ly and her family, have not received enough support.

"I read about this rice ATM on the internet. I came to check it out, and couldn't believe it came out for real. I really hope the sponsors would keep doing this until the end of the pandemic," said Ly, adding that her family's biggest problem was now paying their rent.

Community transmission

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limited scale". It also said the outbreak was restricted to certain clusters in the country.

Zahid said 1,570 samples were tested in 24 hours till 2:30pm yesterday. Besides, three more people recovered in the 24 hours, raising the total number of recovery cases to 42.

No details on the newly infected or deceased were disclosed in the bulletin, which was aired online.

The minister reiterated that Bangladesh was still in a better condition compared to the USA and Europe. "No country can treat millions of patients in its hospitals," he said.

He claimed that the government was taking all-out steps to fight the outbreak. "We're allowing every public and private medical college at the district level to treat coronavirus patients."

He also said negotiations were underway with private hospitals, including Shahabuddin Hospital and Anwar Khan Medical College Hospital in the capital, for the treatment of Covid-19 patients. "We're also adding private hospitals in every district to this list."

As of Sunday, the virus spread to 29 districts out of the country's 64 districts. In the capital, it spread to 81 neighbourhoods, shows official data.

In the bulletin, Prof Nasima Sultana, additional director of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), said the number of tests carried out in 24 hours till 2:30pm yesterday was 17 percent higher than that of the previous day.

She said 5,684 people were placed in home quarantine, 484 in institutional quarantine and 84 in isolation across the country.

She urged people to stay at home and maintain the sneezing and coughing etiquette to contain the spread of coronavirus.

Meanwhile, a six-year-old boy, who

Tracking source

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"Community transmission began a few days ago and we are now at stage-4, which means an epidemic," Jahidur Rahman, virologist and assistant professor at Shahid Suhrawardy Medical College, told The Daily Star yesterday.

"The reason for worry is that if we cannot identify the source, how will the spread be contained?" he asked.

The virologist further said, "We have to impose strict lockdown and bring all symptomatic and asymptomatic cases under screening within the locked down areas."

Currently, people in almost every corner of the city and many districts across the country have been affected, he said.

Prof Flora also warned that the coronavirus outbreak in Bangladesh will become an epidemic if people do not follow the stringent guidelines on social distancing.

The number of new cases has been jumping daily since April 4, amidst a nationwide shutdown of offices and the public transport system.

Some 40 of the 64 districts have now confirmed Covid-19 patients.

Yesterday, 182 people tested positive for Covid-19 in the previous 24 hours. With this, the total number of infected reached 803 and the death toll now stands at 39.

That overcrowded Dhaka is the epicentre of the outbreak is not a surprise -- as of Sunday, 52 percent of total Covid-19 patients identified are in the capital.

"Dhaka is the worst hit because the coronavirus patients travelled through Dhaka and lockdown was not strictly followed here," said Prof Flora.

"We found that many people who came from abroad said they will stay in their village homes but we later found they stayed on in Dhaka," she added.

In Tolarbagh, the IEDCR tracked where the transmission began but could not identify how the first patient was infected. The same goes for Basabo

tested positive for Covid-19, died in Chattogram General Hospital early yesterday.

The boy was admitted to Patiya Upazila Health Complex on Saturday as he was suffering from fever and diarrhoea, said Dr Hasan Shahriar Kabir, divisional director of the DGHS in Chattogram.

His sample was collected and sent to Bangladesh Institute of Tropical and Infectious Diseases at Faujdardhat to test for coronavirus.

After he tested positive for Covid-19, he was rushed to Chattogram General Hospital where he died around 2:30am yesterday.

INFECTION NUMBERS TO RISE: EXPERT

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday evening, Prof Nazrul Islam, virologist and former vice chancellor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), said, "What we've understood in the last few days is that the [coronavirus] infection rate will go high soon."

He then criticised the authorities for coming up with "incomplete information" in the daily bulletins.

"I have never seen such type of press notes. They are hiding information," he said, demanding "right and complete" information from health officials.

He also criticised Zahid Maleque, saying the health minister, in the bulletin, said many were not obeying the government lockdown, but did not mention anything about the measures to be taken against them.

Prof ABM Abdullah, personal physician of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, however, thinks the infection rate might drop after three to four days.

"The law enforcement agencies are enforcing the nationwide lockdown strictly across the country. If they can continue it, the transmission will stop. So, the next 3-4 days are crucial for us."

He, however, agreed that people in many places were not staying indoors.

-- patient zero has not been identified.

After Dhaka, Narayanganj is another virus hotspot with 107 patients testing positive for coronavirus, as of Sunday.

Health officials said the spread in the district was caused from mass gatherings but they were unable to identify how the first person was infected.

Prof Flora said all the catalysts for the outbreak, including gatherings and returnees from abroad, were present in the case of Narayanganj.

"We do not know and we are not working on it," said ASM Alamgir, principal scientific officer of IEDCR, when asked about this shortcoming in tracing the spread. He said they are focused on testing and treating patients now.

Narayanganj district has been locked down since April 8, as well as parts of the capital. But dodging the eyes of law enforcers, people are still on the streets, increasing the risk of further spread of the virus.

Health officials, requesting anonymity, said the country is at stage-4. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), stage-4 means the spread of the virus is practically uncontrollable and there are many major clusters of infection all over the country.

"There is no confusion that we are at stage-4 and the situation is epidemic here," said Muzaherul Huq, former regional adviser of WHO's Southeast Asia.

If the government takes an appropriate strategy and fixes its priority areas, it will be easy to deal with and eventually overcome the crisis, he added.

Health Minister Zahid Maleque said yesterday, "Community transmission of the virus has already occurred in the country, but we have to be careful so that it does not grow."

The minister urged everyone to stay at home and abide by the guidelines to avoid contracting the virus.



People get rice from a 24/7 automatic rice dispensing machine, 'Rice ATM', during the outbreak of the coronavirus disease in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Darkness will fade away

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next three fiscal years.

"The shock of the world economic recession has become a cause of concern for our economy. We don't know how long this crisis will persist and how it will affect our economy. But we are working to face the possible economic adverse impact."

State-owned Bangladesh Betar and Bangladesh Television simultaneously broadcast the PM's address. Private television channels and radio stations also aired the speech.

In her around 16-minute speech, Hasina said the government has taken up various programmes to protect the marginal people.

In this connection, she mentioned that the government has allocated 5 lakh tonnes of rice and 1 lakh tonnes of wheat for distribution among the low-income people for free and the market price of this allocation is Tk 2,503 crore.

For the low-income people living in urban areas, the sale of rice at Tk 10 under the OMS has started and 74,000 tonnes of rice would be distributed under this programme. The government had allotted Tk 251 crore to this, the PM added.

'DON'T LOSE MORALE'

Talking about physicians, nurses and

other health workers, Hasina asked them not to lose their morale during this crisis. She said the whole nation was there with them.

"Doctors, nurses and other health workers continue to provide treatment to Covid-19 patients from the frontline, ignoring the constraint of resources and the risk of death. Your profession is of such a challenge," she said.

The PM on behalf of the people of the country thanked and hailed the health workers, saying the government has already directed the authorities concerned to prepare a list of the health workers who are directly dealing with Covid-19 patients.

She said health workers would be given special honorarium as Tk 100 crore was being allocated to this end.

Hasina said a process is underway to introduce a special health insurance for physicians, nurses, other health workers, field-level administration officers, members of law enforcement agencies, Armed Forces and BGB, and other government employees directly involved in this regard.

If anyone gets contracted with Covid-19, there would be a health insurance of Tk 5-10 lakh for that person depending on the rank and position. In the case of death, one will get five times of the insurance

coverage amount. The allocation of Tk 750 crore is being kept aside for the health insurance and life insurance in this regard, she said.

Noting that there was no shortage of safety equipment, Hasina said the health workers would continue providing the optimum services keeping themselves protected.

She also urged every public and private hospital authorities to keep an eye on the situation so that the general patients were in no way got deprived of healthcare services.

Referring to agriculture, the PM said the continuation of regular agricultural production would not only be enough as it would have to be boosted in this time of dire crisis. "Don't leave any piece of land uncultivated so that the country doesn't see any food crisis in future."

The premier said a fund of Tk 5,000 crore is being created to provide running capital to the agricultural sector. From this fund, loans will be disbursed at 4 percent interest rate among the small and medium farmers in agriculture, fisheries, dairy and poultry sectors. Besides, an allocation of Tk 9,500 crore is being kept as the subsidy to the agriculture sector.

'NO FOOD CRISIS NOW'

On the front line, true to their oath

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At least 32 doctors have tested positive for the coronavirus until April 12 and the number of infected health service providers is over 60, according to Bangladesh Doctors' Foundation.

Three of them are now at ICU while the of number of doctors in quarantine is between 250 and 300, Nirupam Das, chief administrator of BDF told The Daily Star.

BDF, a platform of around 1 lakh doctors and medical students, collected the information from officials concerned, he said.

"If doctors are infected at such a rate, the healthcare system will collapse," he said.

In India, 8,504 people tested positive for coronavirus as of April 12 and of them, 289 died, according to NDTV.

At least 90 healthcare workers, including doctors and nurses, tested coronavirus positive in India, NDTV reports.

Nirupam said many healthcare employees got infected due to the lack of proper PPEs.

Besides, many patients hid their health histories when they came to hospitals and later some of them were test positive for Covid-19. Eventually, the ones who provided them treatment, got infected, he said.

Delayed introduction of triage at

hospitals is also responsible for the situation, he said.

Triage is the process of determining the priority of patients' treatment based on the severity of their condition or the likelihood of their recovery with or without treatment.

EXPERIENCE AND CHALLENGES

People sometimes do not cooperate with doctors and nurses when they test positive or come to hospitals with flu-like symptoms, some doctors said.

A man in Ramganj upazila of Lakshmipur, who was tested positive on Saturday, refused to come to hospital despite repeated requests by healthcare providers.

"Police had to intervene. They went to his village with an ambulance and brought him to the district hospital. The situation will be difficult to handle if people do not cooperate with us," said Civil Surgeon Abdul Gaffar of the district.

"People are hiding the covid-19-like symptoms... PPE is necessary for all healthcare providers now."

A doctor at Kuwait Bangladesh Friendship Government Hospital said, "Sometimes we do not have the time for lunch... We eat some biscuits and drink water. There is no fixed working hour for us now."

Kuwait-Bangladesh Maitree Hospital is a major hospital for

treating Covid-19 patients.

"We do not want any extra money or benefits. What we need is appreciation, not criticism," he said.

Sometimes physicians have to do the job of other employees, he said.

Diretorate General of Health Services (DGHS) on Saturday suspended six doctors of the hospital after they allegedly declined to treat Covid-19 patients. Besides, there are reports that doctors declined to treat suspected coronavirus patients who died later.

Most private hospitals shuttered their gates after the outbreak. After criticism, however, they changed their decisions.

WHAT TO DO NOW

The government should ensure that the PPEs are "up to the mark", and triage must be followed properly, Nirupam said.

Prof Muzaherul Huq, former adviser (Southeast Asia Region) of the World Health Organization, said whenever doctors get a suspected Covid-19 patient, they must maintain proper distance.

The ideal practice should be to quarantine doctors and other health employees treating Covid-19 patients.

The authorities should ensure residential and other essential services to the doctors at the hospital,

Saudi quarantine offers temporary lifeline to struggling hotels

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia has quarantined thousands of people in hotels, some in luxury suites, to combat Covid-19, throwing a temporary lifeline to an industry struggling just months after tourist visas were launched.

Faced with nearly 4,500 novel coronavirus infections -- the highest in the Gulf -- the petro-state has halted air travel, locked down cities and imposed nationwide curfews in a crisis that has dealt a blow to the nascent tourism sector.

Offering a ray of hope, however, the government is splurging millions of dollars to quarantine thousands of overseas travellers and those exposed to infected people in otherwise empty hotels around the kingdom.

One four-star hotel in central Riyadh with 100-plus rooms was left with only five guests in mid-March when the Saudi government offered four million riyals (\$1.06 million) a month for it to be used as a quarantine facility, an industry source told AFP.

Hasina said there was no food crisis now in the country as adequate food grains are there in government warehouses and the houses of farmers.

Noting that the country had a bumper yield of Aman crops in the season, she said it is expected that there will also be a bumper production of Boro paddy in the ongoing season.

PAHELA BAISHAKH

The PM said the government has imposed a ban on all outdoor programmes to celebrate Pahela Baishakh due to the deadly coronavirus.

"It has been done taking the greater public health condition into consideration," she said.

Hasina urged all not to plunge into fear and panic as it weakens human's resistance power. "Don't spread panic. We all have to face the situation with courage and the government is always beside you," she said.

She also mentioned that some vested quarters were trying to mislead people through spreading rumours which was not desirable at all at this crisis moment.

The PM asked the media outlets to publish authentic information with responsibility to support the government to face the pandemic.

he said.

Hospitals treating Covid-19 patients, must have the arrangement, he said.

"If making residential facilities at hospitals isn't possible, they [doctors] can be kept at hotels, but similar safety measures must be taken there," he told The Daily Star.

A doctor at Dhaka Medical College Hospital said the government should immediately involve doctors at different private hospitals in this fight, otherwise it would not be possible to manage the situation.

Many nurses and ward boys who still don't have PPE are exposed to the risks and they are putting their colleagues and family members at risk, he said wishing anonymity.

BANGLADESH'S STRENGTH

According to a 2018 DGHS bulletin, the number of registered BMBS doctors was 93,358 while 9,569 were registered as BDS.

A total of 25,615 doctors are employed against 27,409 posts at different facilities under DGHS, according to a March 2020 report.

Besides, around 75,000 doctors are involved in different private facilities, a DGHS official said.

Asked about the quality of PPE, Aminul Hasan, director (Hospital) at DGHS, said, "Now we have ensured the quality of PPE."

Six people

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the same symptoms, while a 35-year-old man died of similar problems at his home at the city's Tanbazar area early yesterday.

Authorities concerned collected a sample from the body of the 70-year-old man, but a sample of the 35-year-old man could not be collected, said Sheikh Mostafa Ali, health officer of Narayanganj City Corporation, adding that the body was cremated before the sample could be collected.

In Noakhali, a 45-year-old man died of fever, vomiting and respiratory problems at his residence at Kesharpar union under Senbagh upazila early yesterday (Monday).

In Chapainawabganj, a 14-year-old boy, who was suffering flu like symptoms, died at his home at Shibganj upazila's Purbo Shyampur village on Sunday night.

In Rajbari, a 65-year-old man died at his home at Laxmikolpur Old Harisava area in the town on Sunday afternoon. He too was suffering from similar symptoms.

(Our Correspondents from Chattogram, Narayanganj, Noakhali, Chapainawabganj and Faridpur correspondents contributed to the story.)