

Spain village churns out coffins as death doubles demand

AFP, Piñor

It may be small but Pinor village in a remote corner of northwestern Spain has the peculiar distinction of being known for coffins, with coronavirus death doubling demand at its nine workshops.

Spain is suffering one of the world's most deadly outbreaks that has killed more than 18,500 people in just two months.

For mayor Jose Luis Gonzalez, the pandemic has sent the amount of work soaring for those in the coffin-making business in this village of just over 1,000 people.

"Since (the crisis) began, we've seen demand double from normal levels," he told AFP.

At his own business, which he inherited from his father, that has meant workers constructing "around 400" coffins a month, when they

would normally be producing half that number.

With deaths mounting daily, the funeral industry has also come under pressure because the usual imports of caskets from China "are no longer arriving".

These days, the coffin-makers of Pinor are taking orders from across Spain despite initial supply chain concerns when the lockdown began on March 14, which triggered "panic that we might run out of caskets".

In order to meet demand, the village's craftsmen have had to speed up and simplify their way of working.

"We work many more hours and the coffins are more basic in terms of quality," he said, explaining that they were plain varnished wooden caskets without any of the usual marble or glass adornments.

RMG protest rages on

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Workers said the authorities had employed by its member organisations but added that they also fall under the purview of the trade body in a broader sense.

It also claimed that the rest 13 percent who have not cleared their dues mostly belonged to the small and medium factories who don't have big buyers behind them and who receive subcontracts from big factories.

The BGMEA gave this information in a statement disseminated to reporters through a WhatsApp group yesterday.

Without public transport operating, how it could be expected that the salaries would be disbursed in a seamless manner, said Rubana Huq, president of the organisation.

"We will have glitches, but we will overcome. This has been caused as a consequence of a global crisis," she said.

Meanwhile, workers yesterday demonstrated in Dhaka's Mirpur and Adabor areas demanding salaries of March.

Agitations also took place in Savar, Ashulia, Gazipur and Narayanganj.

Around 100 workers of A-One (BD) Ltd in Dhaka Export Pressing Zone (DEPZ) staged sit-in program in front of BEPZA office demanding arrears of the last three months.

On the front line

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call and beg the landlord to let her," said Rahman.

Sirajul Islam, a male nurse who lives in Chankharpool and works in the burn unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital, said he was asked to leave on March 26. "You deal with infected patients. So, you have to leave this house," he quoted his landlord as saying.

"The hospital administration had to call my landlord and explain to him that I worked at the burn unit... I am looking for other housing options at the moment," said Sirajul.

DMCH's isolation ward nurse Shiuly Khatun is in a similar situation in Banasree. "I have been living in this house for the last 10 years, but last week I was told that I might be infecting people in the building. I was asked to act according to my conscience," she said.

"I am feeling unsafe at work because we do not have N95 masks, and I am feeling unsafe at home because I might be infecting people and maybe they are justified in wanting me out of the house," she said.

The nurses have been mulling over the need for residential facilities in

their hospitals.

DMCH Nurses' Association General Secretary Asaduzzaman Jewel has been looking after patients in the isolation ward.

"I had to go to into home quarantine because five of the patients I looked after turned out to be coronavirus positive. We did not wear N95 masks when dealing with them. Maybe I am infected and have infected other people," he said, adding that temporary residential facilities for nurses will be a good way to control infection.

Mujibur Rahman, head of the department of medicine at DMCH, said, "Patients with flu-like symptoms come to our hospital. Some of them later test positive for coronavirus but it is not possible for us to know from the get-go."

DMCH Director Brig Gen Dr Nasir Uddin said, "We are trying to arrange residential facilities for those who are working at the hospital."

Suhrawardy Hospital Director Uttam Kumar Barua also said officials were looking for residential facilities for nurses.

32 Rohingyas die

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"We understand these men, women and children were at sea for nearly two months in harrowing conditions and that many of them are extremely malnourished and dehydrated," the U.N. refugee agency UNHCR said.

"UNHCR is offering to assist the government to move these people to quarantine facilities," it added in a statement that also offered medical attention.

Media reports that the group was infected with the virus had not been substantiated, the agency said.

Buddhist-majority Myanmar does not recognise Rohingya as citizens, and they face severe curbs on freedom of movement as well as access to healthcare and education.

Myanmar denies persecuting Rohingya and says they are not an indigenous ethnic group but immigrants from South Asia, even though many of them are able to trace their ancestry back centuries.

More than a million live in refugee camps in southern Bangladesh, the majority having been driven from homes in Myanmar after a 2017 military crackdown the army said was a response to attacks by Rohingya insurgents.

Rights groups fear virus curbs across southeast Asia could trigger a repeat of a 2015 crisis, when a crackdown by Thailand prompted smugglers to abandon their human cargo at sea on crowded, rickety boats.

Chris Lewa, director of the Arakan Project, said she believed several more boats were stranded.

"Rohingya may encounter closed borders supported by a xenophobic public narrative," she said in a message.

"COVID-19 cannot be used to deny access to territory to desperate refugees in distress. Another maritime crisis in the Andaman Sea, as in 2015, is unacceptable."

Several boats were trying to reach Malaysian shores and monitoring had been stepped up, a police official in the northwestern state of Kedah told Reuters.

A police official in southern Thailand said five boats carrying Rohingya had been spotted off the coast of Satun province late on Monday. It was not possible to independently confirm the remarks.

People were smuggled out by boat and over land, said Kyaw Hla, a Rohingya from Sittwe in Myanmar's western Rakhine state, where tens of thousands of Rohingya have been confined in camps since a bout of violence in 2012.

"Within these eight years, there has been no progress, only degradation," he said by telephone. "People can't stand it. Since we are locked up and suffocated, people try to leave, of course."

He added, "If the coronavirus breaks out here, we'll be as good as dead."



Cleaners of Dhaka North City Corporation picking garbage and sludge from the street at Natun Bazar in the capital yesterday. The city would collapse without their essential service. But it appears that very little has been done to protect them from the coronavirus.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Storm brewing

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"From next week, we are likely to see a higher number of deaths every day ... A lack of coordination from the health department is to blame," he told The Daily Star.

He said the available data indicated that Bangladesh was heading towards a "disastrous" situation, following the footsteps of Italy, Spain and the USA.

Based on a scientific method of estimation, he claimed that the actual number of Covid-19 patients in the country could be "100 times higher" than that of the cases reported. "The number of tests being carried out daily is too little to know the reality."

He said data indicated that more and more people with common fever and cold were being tested positive for the coronavirus. "If 50 percent of all with fever and cold are tested, then we can get the real number of patients."

He also said, "The authorities claim that they are well prepared [to tackle the situation]. But the information given by them on the preparedness is far from the ground reality."

Like most countries across the world, the authorities in Bangladesh are using the PCR technique, a gold-standard technology for Covid-19 confirmation, which detects pieces of the coronavirus through analysing sputum or mucus samples collected from the human body -- nasal and throat.

The expert said the technique has some drawbacks. "One in every four confirmed coronavirus cases tested false negative. So there is a need for a second test."

On March 8, the authorities reported the first death from Covid-19 in the country. On April 9, the authorities for the first time reported more than a hundred cases (112) in a single day.

In the last eight days, the number of

detected cases have continued to jump.

In yesterday's bulletin, aired online, Prof Dr Nasima Sultana, additional director general of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), said of those 10 who died in 24 hours since 2:30 three were females and seven males.

Six of them were from Dhaka while the rest from elsewhere.

One of the 10 was aged between 71 and 80, five between 61 and 70, three between 51 and 60 and the other two between 21 and 30, she said.

"Some 2,019 samples were tested in the 24 hours. The number of tests increased by 16 percent and sample collection by 4 percent from the previous day."

She also said 37 patients were taken into isolation in the 24 hours, increasing the total to 461. Nine were released. Around 4,499 people were in home quarantine and some 715 people were put in the institutional quarantine.

Currently, 33,300 people are in home quarantine and 3,274 are in institutional quarantine across the country, she added.

So far, the highest number of cases have been detected in Dhaka followed by Narayanganj, which is dubbed the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak in Bangladesh.

Till now, the virus has spread to 40 of the 64 districts.

The government is increasing the treatment facilities. Now, there are 192 ICU facilities across the country, according to the DGHS.

Some 488 institutions were readied for quarantine where 26,352 people could be accommodated, it said.

Meanwhile, Habibur Rahman Khan, additional secretary of the Health Service Division of the health and family welfare ministry, said four staffers of the

IEDCR had tested coronavirus positive on April 7. No new cases have been detected there since then.

Following the detection, IEDCR Director Prof Meerjady Sabrina Flora and some of her colleagues were working from home.

Talking to The Daily Star, Prof Sabrina said, "We are continuing our work by maintaining social distance."

WHOLE COUNTRY AT RISK

In another development, the government yesterday declared that the entire country was at risk amid the coronavirus pandemic as the infection spread to its various parts.

DGHS Director General Prof Abul Kalam Azad issued a notice in this regard.

"The virus has spread to many areas of the country. As it spreads from person to person, it will not be possible to prevent the spread of the virus if physical distancing is not ensured," said the notice.

"Bangladesh has been declared at risk of infection under the Infectious Diseases (Prevention, Control and Elimination) Act 2018," it said.

Contacted, Prof Azad said, "The issuance of the circular doesn't mean that the risk has increased in Bangladesh all of a sudden. But it [circular] was necessary to help implement the steps taken by the government."

He said the emergency services would remain as the same mentioned in the previous circulars.

"People must stay at home to contain the spread of the virus. No one should go out unless it's an absolute emergency. No one will be allowed to stay outside from 6:00pm to 6:00am," the notice.

The DHGS warned that stern action will be taken if anyone violated the directive.

all concerned to take effective measures to stop further spreading of coronavirus.

"Take hot water and seasonal local foods to boost your immune system to fight the coronavirus," she said.

The PM also instructed the local administrations to put the foreign returnees in compulsory home quarantine and arrange places for putting them under institutional quarantine, if necessary, to prevent spreading of the diseases.

Hasina directed the naval police and coast guards to take effective measures so that none, particularly the workers of brick fields, could enter other areas through the naval routes.

The PM once again asked the local administrations to arrange markets in larger places to avoid mass gatherings.

Referring to an incident of leaving a mother in a jungle as she was suffering from cold, cough and fever, she requested all to be humane towards the Covid-19 patients.

"People are becoming inhuman after being panicked in the wake of coronavirus. There is no logic of such inhumanity. Take measures for giving treatment if any person shows coronavirus symptoms."

The premier also criticised the mentality of ousting a physician from his area due to his illness and said she wanted to bring it to the notice of all as she had heard many such incidents.

"Why such incidents happened in Bangladesh? Bangladeshi people were not supposed to be such inhuman."

Referring to suspension of prayers at mosques in Saudi Arabia, the PM asked all to follow the government guidelines relating to holding prayers during the holy month of Ramadan.

"Offer your prayers, particularly the Tarabi, in the holy month of Ramadan by following the directives to support the government efforts to contain the spread of coronavirus."

She said her government has taken every possible measure to make sure sufficient supply of essentials in the markets during the Ramadan as there is no shortage of commodities in the country.

PM's Principal Secretary Ahmad Kaikaus moderated the programme. Cabinet Secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam, PM's Press Secretary Ihsanul Karim, PMO Secretary Tofazzel Hossain Miah and PM's personal physician Dr ABM Abdullah were present at the Gono Bhaban.

Others too

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deployed to ensure lockdown and convince people to stay home while maintaining physical distancing. On many occasions, police have to guard potential Covid-19 patients so that they cannot flee. They have also been arranging funerals for dead coronavirus patients.

Bankers are another group of professionals who are providing services to people by keeping financial transactions alive. In doing so, they have to deal with a huge number of customers daily, which can be a possible source of coronavirus infection.

Police too are risking their lives.

"We are working in a panicked situation. All [of my colleagues] are panicking now," said a sub-inspector (SI), preferring anonymity, of a police station in Dhaka.

"We have taken very little safety measures. Yet we have to deal all types of people and we don't know who is infected and who is not," he said.

Sharing his experience, the SI said three people in his police station have tested positive for Covid-19 and they had to be guarded so that they could not flee.

Law enforcers are also having to be stationed near hospitals.

"But, in the name PPE [personal protective equipment], what we have provided are actually raincoats. Besides, we had to buy gloves and hand sanitisers [on our own]," he said.

He has already sent his wife and two and a half-year-old child to their village home for their safety.

While their lives are at risk, their workloads have also increased, he said.

Amid the coronavirus outbreak, they had to increase check-posts and patrol in areas under their jurisdictions. "Apart from our normal work, we have to collect all corona-related information, market monitoring, ensure lockdown and convince people to stay home."

Many people, however, do not want to follow safety instructions, he added. "In the given situation, we are trying our best for the sake of the people and the country."

An employee of a private bank also shares a worrisome picture. Amid the shutdown, all private and public banks are operating at a limited scale.

The banker lives at Mayakanan area near the capital's Bashabo, one of the most Covid-19 affected areas. He has to go to his office in Motijheel on foot. His colleagues living in other parts of the city or in Narayanganj are facing bigger problems. They have to work each alternative week.

"Whenever, I come out of my home, I get frightened... We are living in constant fear. One fear that always come to mind id whether I have been infected when I was outside," he said, asking not be named.

As he works at the headquarters, he has to deal with a relatively high number of people. "But my colleagues working at branch offices are at a higher risk as they have to deal with a bigger number of people directly," he said.

Situations at public banks are even more dangerous, especially at the countryside, as those have very limited online transaction systems.

An official of Sonali Bank Limited in Faridpur said that although the government has set a limited time for bank transactions, the number of service-seekers remains the same. Besides, some of their colleagues do not come to office regularly as their homes are far away.

"In the given situation, we have to deal with almost the same number of customers in half the normal time with fewer staffers," he said.

Asked about customer safety, he said they deployed police so that customers maintain social distancing, but, on many occasions, service seekers do not bother.

About staff safety, the authorities concerned have given safety materials, which are inadequate, so they had to personally collect some, he said. "But when I go home, I feel insecure. I take a bath and wash all my clothes regularly to feel secure."

5 more die

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different places, including Dhaka and Cumilla medical college hospitals, yesterday.

Of them, a CNG-run auto-rickshaw driver, aged around 50, died while undergoing treatment at Dhaka Medical College Hospital, our Chandpur correspondent reports quoting Md Shakhawat Ullah, civil surgeon of the district.

A six-year-old child of Shahrasti upazila died with the same symptoms at Cumilla Medical College Hospital early yesterday, according to the civil surgeon.

On information, the local administration locked down the house of the dead and collected samples from the bodies for the tests, said Shah Alam, officer-in-charge of Shahrasti Police Station.

A 30-year-old man from Matlab Uttar upazila died at his home yesterday noon after suffering from a fever, cold and cough. A team of physicians of the district civil surgeon's office was sent to the victim's house to collect samples from the body.

Another person from the same age-group, from Chandpur Sadar upazila, died after suffering from coronavirus-like symptoms, our correspondent reports quoting Sazeda Begum, a health and family planning officer of the upazila.