

Outbreak keeps gaining pace

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required ICU support.

After Dhaka, the highest number of new cases were reported in Gazipur, a new epicentre of the outbreak, followed by Narayanganj and Kishoreganj.

Of the new cases of infection, 62 percent are male and 48 percent female.

Overall, almost 34 percent of all the coronavirus cases in the country were detected in the capital alone, according to IEDCR website.

Providing additional information on the countrywide infection, Prof Flora said 21-30 was the age group worst affected by the outbreak.

About 27 percent of the total cases are aged between 21 and 30, while 22 percent between 31 and 40, and 19 percent between 41 and 50 years, she said.

On Friday, the IEDCR director had said among the total infected, 68 percent were taking treatment at their homes while 32 percent were admitted to different hospitals.

"Not all the 32 percent Covid-19 patients, who are receiving treatment at hospitals, required hospitalisation," she said, adding

UV hope for PPE

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proves successful in sterilising the necessary PPE, there is potential for the UV facilities to be rolled out across major hospitals throughout the country.

"We are very excited for this project to be successful," says Rahim, "but we cannot do without the help of the authorities and we need volunteers to come forward leaving the panic aside."

The sheer scale of the PPE required if there was a surge in coronavirus patients would be impossible to handle. But many lives may potentially be saved if the currently available PPEs could be sterilised rapidly and re-utilised.

This practice is already going on in many other parts of the world. In China, entire buses are being lit up



for the UV light at night in order to disinfect them. Robots are emitting UV light to clean hospital floors and even banks are using them to sterilise money.

The UV light scrambles the genetic material of viruses and bacteria rendering them dead. While there aren't yet any definitive studies proving its effectiveness against Covid-19, it has been used with success against SARS, which is another type of coronavirus.

The much-publicised death of a British-Bangladeshi doctor, Dr Abdul Mabud Chowdhury, in East London shocked the expatriate community to their core. In the week prior to his death, following Covid-19 complications, he wrote on his Facebook page about the challenges of having adequate PPE, something outlined proudly by his son during a BBC interview the day after his passing.

And, the mission of Rahim is a part of many Bangladeshi diaspora initiatives to help the citizens of their motherland in dealing with the pandemic.

Nazneen Sultana, a Boston-based

that many had to be admitted to hospitals in face of social pressure.

She emphasised that if a patient was in a stable state, it was best for the person and the health authorities that the individual was given treatment at his home in complete isolation.

In the bulletin yesterday, aired online, Prof Nasima Sultana, additional director general of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), said 2,114 samples were tested in 24 hours till 2:30pm yesterday, which brought the total number of samples tested to 21,307.

She said the number of tests increased by 11.01 percent from the previous day.

She also said Covid-19 testing facility was ensured at Jashore Science and Technology University, taking the total number of such testing labs to 19 across the country.

"From now on, samples to be collected from Jashore, Jhenidah and Narail districts would be tested there" she said.

On March 8, the authorities reported first three cases of Covid-19 while the first patients died of the disease on March 18.



A man feeding stray dogs in front of Dhaka College yesterday. Food sources for the animals have become scarcer since people retreated from the streets and restaurants are shuttered.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Rogue dealers with political links to blame

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meant for the poor and arrested 49 people in 46 upazilas, according to The Daily Star reports.

They also seized 6,480 litres of soybean oil, 18 sacks of sugar, and 25 sacks of chickpea.

In most cases, local ruling party leaders were found involved in the theft of the food items, the reports show.

Amid allegations of rice misappropriation, the government suspended the Special OMS Programme on April 15, and decided to issue cards for low-income people across the country so that they can buy rice for Tk 10 a kg.

Earlier on April 5, the food department launched the Special OMS programme so that low-income people can buy rice for Tk 10 a kg amid the countrywide shutdown.

The other one, the Food Friendly Programme, was introduced in 2016. Under the programme, 50 lakh families buy 30kg rice a month for Tk 10 a kg.

POLITICAL INFLUENCE

Food items under these programmes are distributed by dealers, and this is where irregularities start.

Though there is a committee, led by upazila nirbahi officer, in every upazila and a set of criteria for selecting a dealer for these food programmes, recommendations from local lawmakers or ruling party leaders are the main "yardstick" for the selection, say a number of dealers and officials.

"Political consideration is certainly there... We get flooded with recommendations from local political leaders once we start the process of selecting dealers for these programmes," said a UNO of an upazila in Barishal Division.

And this is not a secret.

In October 2017, the parliamentary standing committee on the commerce ministry suggested giving dealership of the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh to individuals as per lawmakers' recommendations to ensure "accountability and transparency".

The TCB dealers also sell food items under the OMS Programme, and most of them are either involved with the ruling party or have ties with local lawmakers and ruling party leaders, said local officials.

"Small as well as big traders get dealership, using their political links... Recommendations from local lawmakers are very important here," said an assistant commissioner (land) of an upazila under Rangpur Division.

Local public representatives,

including upazila chairmen, union parishad chairmen and members have links with these dealers, said the official seeking anonymity.

"Whenever any theft or misappropriation of food items takes place, it becomes difficult to deal with.

"They [local representatives] often try to legalise the dealers' illegal activities for their vested interest."

Each union has three to four dealers, and they hold dealership for years unless serious allegations of corruption are brought against them, a secretary of a union parishad in Lalmonirhat told this newspaper.

"Recommendations from local MPs and political leaders are a must for getting dealership."

Babul Das, a dealer in Khulna city's Railgate area, said a section of dealers sell rice, allocated under the government food programmes, in the wholesale market, instead of selling it to low-income people, as it is more profitable.

"A dealer gets 50 to 75 paisa from the sale of per kg rice under the Special OMS Programme. But if the dealer sells rice in the wholesale market, the profits soar exponentially."

A number of government officials said dealers also misappropriate food items by keeping the local food offices in the dark about the unsold goods, and in some cases, they do it in collusion with a section of local food officials.

WHAT FOOD MINISTRY DID?

Instead of looking into the problem regarding selection of dealers, the food ministry and the minister wrote to local administration and police several times, asking them to stop irregularities and take action against the culprits.

But it didn't help, and the ministry had to suspend the Special OMS Programme last week, leaving the low-income people in deep trouble.

Following media reports, the food ministry on April 13 formed a three-member committee, led by an additional secretary, to investigate the misappropriation of a huge amount of rice and give recommendations.

The same day, the food minister asked the director general of Directorate General of Food to probe whether any of its officials were involved in the irregularities.

WHAT AUTHORITIES SAY

Contacted, Food Minister Sadhan Chandra Majumder said they already instructed all deputy commissioners and others involved in the selection of dealers to take punitive measures, including cancellation of dealership and confiscation of security money, if any dealer is found involved in

irregularities in food distribution.

"We have also asked them to replace the dishonest dealers with the good ones."

Asked about the selection of dealers on the basis of political affiliation, the food minister said, "We have asked the authorities concerned to strictly abide by the guidelines while selecting dealers."

The DCs and others concerned have been asked to prepare a list of vulnerable families within five days to provide each family with 20 Kg rice a month, he mentioned.

Besides, the food ministry will continue the Food Friendly Programme in May to provide 30 kg rice a month to each of 50 lakh poor families.

The programme is usually run from March to April, and from September to November.

Agriculture Minister Abdur Razzaque said the government will be tougher, if necessary, to stop irregularities in food distribution.

"We thought no one would resort to foul play at this time of grave crisis. But since some people are doing it even at this time, the government will take harsher action against them."

Mozibor Rahman, convener of the three-member probe body and also an additional secretary of the food ministry, said they found a lack of proper monitoring regarding the food programmes.

A government official is supposed to monitor distribution of subsidised food items in a particular area, but many of the officials failed to do so amid the coronavirus scare, and a number of dealers took advantage of it, he told this newspaper yesterday.

He further said they got complaints of irregularities from all divisions, but could not give the number of dealers facing allegations of misappropriation.

Replying to another question, he said they had not so far found involvement of any officials in these irregularities.

The official stressed the need for strict monitoring and putting the names of all cardholders under the Special OMS Programme on government websites to ensure transparency.

He said they will recommend some changes in the guidelines for running the food programmes.

Talking to The Daily Star, Hafizuddin Khan, former adviser to a caretaker government, said the government must take punitive action against the corrupt dealers, irrespective of their party affiliation, to stop irregularities in food programmes.

Don't despair

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Hasina said isolation units were opened at different divisional headquarters and districts. The government would take measures to set up intensive care units at every district hospital, she added.

She said there was no shortage of Covid-19 testing kits in the country.

The PM said her government would distribute 50 lakh ration cards among the low-income people in addition to the existing 50 lakh so that they do not have problems with food.

"Inshallah, we will be able to take measures so that nobody faces problems regarding food."

Mentioning that Bangladesh had no experience of dealing with such an epidemic, Hasina said they couldn't imagine that such a health-related cyclone would hit.

"But after knowing about the coronavirus, we took some immediate health safety measures in line with the guidelines from World Health Organisation, which include closing of schools and colleges, imposing restrictions on social gathering, shutting airports and land ports and ensuring 14-day quarantine for those returning home from abroad," she added.

The premier said she has already instructed the disaster management and relief ministry to get involved with the government's three hotline numbers so that it can send food aid to the callers.

Yesterday afternoon, the House went into its seventh session for a very brief period due to the spread of Covid-19 in the country.

With Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury in the chair, the sitting started around 5:00pm.

The Speaker said the 11th parliament went into its seventh session amid the Covid-19 outbreak due to a constitutional obligation.

The constitution stipulates that there can be a maximum 60-day gap between the end of a session and the beginning of the next one, she said.

"As the last session of parliament was prorogued on February 18, the next session would have to be held within April 18," she said.

The session was prorogued within an hour after adoption of a condolence motion on the death of Awami League lawmaker M Shamsur Rahman Sharif from Pabna-4. The MP passed away at a city hospital on April 2.

The PM, AL MP Matia Chowdhury, and Opposition Chief Whip Moshirul Rahman Ranga, among others, took part in the motion.

Sources at the parliament secretariat said this was the shortest session of Jatiya Sangsad in the recent history of Bangladesh parliament.

The seating arrangement was made ensuring social distancing among lawmakers.

The government earlier advised journalists to cover the session through watching it live on Sangsad Television.

A limited number of lawmakers were present at the House yesterday. Lawmakers mainly from Dhaka and its adjacent districts were present.

Most of the senior and front row MPs remained absent as per advise from the parliament secretariat, sources said.

Thousands gather,

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surrounding areas and a 14-km stretch of Dhaka-Sylhet highway.

Some people went to the roofs of nearby buildings to participate.

The authorities in the evening ordered people of Bertola and its surrounding areas to obey the lockdown rules.

The prayer started around 10:00am and went on for over an hour. The large number of people defying social distancing rules have created fears of further spread of coronavirus among many.

"People around the world are maintaining safe distance to combat coronavirus. But people in this area made a huge gathering," said RAM Obaidul Muktadir Chowdhury, lawmaker from the area and president of district Awami League.

"I guess, they gathered there to invite the virus," he told The Daily Star.

Shahdat Hossain Titu, officer-in-charge of Sarail Police Station, said, "People have come here from different parts of the country including Dhaka. We had no idea such a large number of people would gather here... Actually, we had nothing to do when the people started pouring in."

Deputy Commissioner Hayat-Ud-Dwolla Khan said the district administration contacted the family members of the deceased leader on Friday evening to urge them not to hold a large funeral.

The family members assured officials that the namaz-e-janaza will be held in the presence of a few people, he said.

"But today, we saw a different picture. We did not know such a huge number of people would be here. We are investigating the matter," said the DC.

The Islamic preacher died at his home in Markzpara area of Brahmanbaria on Friday evening. He was 56.

On March 22, Shah Alam, civil surgeon of Brahmanbaria, was made an officer on special duty gatherings at his daughter's wedding.

Half the world locked down

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followed by Italy, Spain and France which have all been ravaged by their own outbreaks.

Many countries are testing only the most serious cases and the number of confirmed global cases is likely only a fraction of the true total.

Virtually no corner of the world has been left untouched, with deaths in Africa passing 1,000 overnight.

Nigeria announced the death of President Muhammadu Buhari's top aide yesterday, the highest-profile person to succumb to the virus in Africa's most populous nation.

And much of the world's 260 million Orthodox Christians were also preparing to mark their Easter celebrations without attending mass.

The Russian Orthodox church has asked the faithful to mark the occasion at home, even though many places of worship will remain open, while services in Turkey will be closed to the public and broadcast on the internet.

COVER-UP CLAIMS

China sharply raised its own death toll to 4,636 on Friday after adding another 1,290 fatalities for the city of Wuhan, where the respiratory disease first emerged late last year.

This builds on a different report done by Brac last week where they surveyed 2,675 people from all districts of Bangladesh and found that 54 percent of the respondents reported zero earnings since the crisis began.

"14 percent have no food reserved at home, while 29 percent have 1-3 days' food reserved," found the report.