

Beware

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At the same time, we ask our readers to be cautious of any web portal that carries a likeness to The Daily Star -- in name, structure or presentation -- as we do not have any other online presence aside from our official website, www.thedailystar.net, or our verified social media channels.

Dhaka

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between 21 and 30 as 23.4 percent and 22.3 percent of the confirmed cases belong to this age groups respectively.

In the 24 hours till 2:30pm yesterday, nine patients have recovered, taking the tally to 75.

During the same period, samples of 2,634 individuals were tested.

Up to yesterday, all the 19 testing labs across the country have tested 23,825 samples.

Globally, more than 1.6 lakh people have died of Covid-19 as of yesterday, according to the health minister.

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

ICU SUPPORT PROVIDE NO GOOD RESULT

Zahid Maleque said doctors have suggested that the oxygen support has been proved to be more useful than ventilation support at the Intensive Care Unit (ICU).

"Results in the ICU was not good. Sadly, eight of the nine patients, who were given ICU support, have died," the minister said, quoting doctors.

He said, "We have ordered for 3,500 oxygen cylinders. Currently, we have some 10,000 cylinders at government hospitals across the country."

About the ineffective lockdown, he said, "The lockdown is not functioning as they expected. And people are moving to different parts of the country from the coronavirus-hit areas. As a result, community transmission is increasing."

Urging people to maintain the lockdown, he said, "So far, the number of new cases has remained steady around 300. If this does not increase, then we are lucky; otherwise, worries are there."

He claimed the country is in a better situation in the "seventh week" of the first reported cases compared to the countries where the virus has wreaked havoc.

NEW TECHNICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Meanwhile, the health ministry yesterday issued a circular forming a 17-member "National Technical Advisory Committee".

The committee would suggest the government about the measures required to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

It will also suggest the government if there is a need to increase the standard of service in hospitals and the measures to improve the skills of doctors who are treating Covid-19 patients.

Led by Prof Mohammad Shahidullah, president of Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council, Prof Nazrul Islam, virologist and former vice chancellor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, Prof AK Azad Khan, president of Bangladesh Diabetic Association, Gynecologist Prof Shahla Khatun, and Prof Mahmudur Rahman, former director of Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) have been made the members of the committee, among others.

Prof Meerjady Sabrina Flora, director of IEDCR, has been made member secretary of the committee.

Virus fears keep Orthodox Easter worshippers at home

AFP, Moscow

More than 260 million Orthodox Christians celebrated Easter Sunday, with church leaders asking worshippers to stay at home to avoid spreading the novel coronavirus.

Orthodox Christians, the world's third largest group of Christian believers, this year celebrate Easter a week after Catholics and Protestants because they follow a different calendar.

Last week's Easter celebrations took place in empty churches while Pope Francis livestreamed his traditional message from the Vatican as the pandemic that has killed more than 150,000 made massed worship too risky.

Most Orthodox Christians will also skip traditional midnight services, even though Eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet Union where most live have relatively low numbers of confirmed cases of the virus so far.

Moscow Patriarch Kirill, who leads 150 million believers, has urged the faithful to pray at home and not go to church until he gives his blessing.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is dropping his usual attendance at an Easter service and will go to a chapel in the grounds of his residence outside Moscow.

In Moscow and the surrounding region, where most Russian COVID-19 cases are concentrated, churches will hold services behind closed doors with broadcasts online or on television.



People buying everyday commodities in the capital's Malibagh Bazar maintaining physical distance. Members of Bangladesh Army ensured distancing in the market.

PHOTO: SHEIKH ENAM

The 'secret' of South Korea

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Hu Kang-il: Korea's Covid-19 control strategy consists of robust testing to identify confirmed cases, tracing their contacts to prevent further spread, and treating those infected at the earliest possible stage, while actively engaging the public in participating in social distancing and other preventive measures.

One of the innovative methods the Korean medical community adopted was "Drive-through Testing Stations". By allowing drivers to go through the testing process without having to leave their vehicles, we could reduce the time needed for sample collection to less than 10 minutes and also limit the exposure of frontline medical workers.

Another method that a number of private hospitals in Korea adopted was a phone-booth type testing facility that enables "walk-through" of potential patients while protecting frontline medical workers who collect specimens behind clear acrylic panels. Incheon International Airport has introduced "open-air walk-through" testing stations that utilise the naturally windy outdoor environment for ventilation.

TDS: How can South Korea extend its support to Bangladesh?

Hu Kang-il: Since the outbreak of Covid-19, the governments

of Bangladesh and Korea have been communicating closely with respect to their domestic situations, immigration and aviation policies, and possible measures to jointly tackle the challenge.

While exerting every effort to curb the epidemic domestically, the Korean government is prudently reviewing the numerous requests from partner countries for test kits, PPEs, and financial support. We are actively sharing best practices and technical expertise with our partners, including Bangladesh, and at the same time seeking effective ways to help Bangladesh secure necessary medical equipment in this difficult time.

TDS: What should the Bangladesh government be doing right now to contain the spread of Covid-19?

Hu Kang-il: It is encouraging that the government of Bangladesh is making full use of available resources to tackle this formidable challenge. Honourable Prime Minister Hasina seems to be fully engaged in the nationwide fight against Covid-19, making frequent public announcements and directives.

Particularly, I would like to highlight the importance of keeping up the number of testing, not only in the capital city but also in rural areas of the country. This will enable the government to see a more accurate picture of the situation and thereby

enhance the effectiveness of tracking and treatment measures. Korea's experience proves that rigorous testing is one of the most important components of a successful response.

In the meantime, it is extremely important that everyone does their part to limit further spread of the virus by strictly adhering to government directives including social distancing, wearing masks, and frequent hand disinfection.

TDS: How is this virus outbreak affecting Korean companies operating here?

Hu Kang-il: Most Korean companies in Bangladesh, many of them in the RMG sector, have ceased operations in their factories in compliance with the Bangladeshi government's directives to temporarily shut down all public and private offices. As is the case with the majority of local industries during this economic slump, these Korean companies face the risk of liquidity crunch as the government holiday is prolonged.

In this regard, it is imperative the Korean companies be eligible for tax breaks and low-interest loans laid out in the government's latest financial stimulus packages. Local and foreign companies alike must be kept afloat in this difficult time lest they be driven out of business to aggravate the economic downturn.

TDS: What could be the economic impact of the virus outbreak and how can Korea join in helping Bangladesh recover?

Hu Kang-il: The Covid-19 pandemic will negatively affect the global economy in a wide range of areas including export industries, domestic consumption, jobs and income, food security, and inequality.

We do not yet know how long this global pandemic will last, but one thing is for sure. The sooner we defeat the virus, the sooner we will start seeing economic recovery. As a trusted partner, Korea will stand by Bangladesh during its fight against the disease and will continue to seek ways to provide assistance in a variety of areas.

TDS: Do you have any special message for the Bangladeshi people on overcoming the crisis?

Hu Kang-il: Korea has shown the world that it is possible to curb the spread of Covid-19 by setting priorities straight and allocating resources in the right places. The Bangladesh government too has responded swiftly with a nationwide shutdown and strict implementation, public health directives, and a series of aggressive stimulus plans. Therefore, I would like to advise the people of Bangladesh to count on their government and follow the directives in place in order to successfully overcome the crisis.

Wuhan lab denies link

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But conspiracy theories that the virus came from a maximum-security virology lab have been brought into the mainstream in recent days by US government officials.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said an investigation was underway into how the virus "got out into the world".

"There's no way this virus came from us," Yuan Zhiming, the head of the P4 laboratory at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which is equipped to handle dangerous viruses, said in an interview with state media.

"I know it's impossible," he added. Amid the tensions, Australia yesterday called for an independent investigation into the global response to the pandemic, including the World Health Organization's handling of the crisis.

Its foreign minister said the country would "insist" on a review that would probe, in part, China's response to the outbreak.

The US has the highest caseload

of any country, with more than 735,000 confirmed infections, and by yesterday had lost 39,000 people to the virus, according to a tally from Johns Hopkins University.

Progress was marked in some places and New York state reported the lowest number of deaths in weeks, which Governor Andrew Cuomo attributed largely to social distancing.

But as Americans and others around the world chafe after weeks under stay-at-home orders, resentment is rising. Anti-lockdown protests on Saturday drew hundreds of people at the capitols of states including Texas, Maryland, New Hampshire and Ohio. Many demonstrators waved American flags and some carried arms.

The small but spreading movement drew encouragement from Trump, who tweeted that three states should be "liberated" from the stay-home orders.

He has called for a rapid return to normality to limit damage to the US economy -- while largely leaving the final decision on easing lockdowns to

state officials.

With 22 million Americans out of work seemingly overnight as businesses closed under the lockdown, families are turning more and more to food banks to get by.

"We have gone for months without work," a woman who gave her name only as Alana said at a food distribution centre in Chelsea in suburban Boston.

Mounting evidence suggests that social distancing has slowed the pandemic after more than half of humanity -- 4.5 billion people -- were confined to their homes.

Stay-at-home orders have been enforced in Italy and Spain, both still the hardest-hit countries in Europe, with death tolls over 20,000, followed by France, which has recorded more than 19,000 fatalities.

As governments around the world grapple with when and how to ease lockdowns, Spain on Saturday extended its nationwide shutdown to May 9.

Yesterday, the country registered

a sharp drop in the daily death toll, with the number falling to 410 from 565 a day before. The total fatalities in Spain have reached 20,453, the health ministry said. Infections rose to 195,344, with 4,218 new cases in the past 24 hours.

Japan, Britain and Mexico have all expanded their movement restrictions.

Yet elsewhere, signs that the outbreak could be easing prompted Switzerland, Denmark and Finland to begin reopening shops and schools this week. Germany is set to follow suit with some shops back in action today.

Iran also allowed some Tehran businesses to reopen Saturday despite the country being home to the Middle East's deadliest outbreak.

Israel has also approved some easing to its tight restrictions -- while pointedly avoiding announcing the first stage of an exit from lockdown.

Many of the world's 260 million Orthodox Christians marked Easter yesterday without attending church services.

Incentives

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The PM, on behalf 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 coronavirus patients.

She said health officials would be given special honorarium, and Tk 100 crore was being allocated to this end, while Tk 750 crore was being allocated for the coverage of health and life insurance, she said.

Finance ministry officials said in a rough estimate they found that around 2.5 lakh officials are working across the nation.

Doctors, nurses, and health workers are facing an overwhelming workload with no end of this situation in sight. On many occasions, they are doing such a stressful job while they are under-protected, overworked and vulnerable to the infection themselves.

To make matters worse, many patients reportedly hide their health and travel histories.

On the other hand, other officials who are performing their duties to ensure essential services and social distancing to make shutdown effective, are coming in contact with so many people, which increases their risk of infection, as the virus is now spreading within communities.

The government is going to announce the incentives against the backdrop of Dr Md Moyeen Uddin, assistant professor of Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital -- the first doctor in the country to die from Covid-19 on April 15.

A total of 115 doctors and at least 50 nurses across the country have already tested positive for coronavirus till Saturday, Doctor Md Shahed Rafi Pavel, chairman of the Bangladesh Doctors' Foundation, told The Daily Star.

He said that two months' basic salary was not a main reason to work. "Doctors should be given proper treatment if they get infected by coronavirus and they should be given a handsome amount as insurance coverage," he said.

He also said that doctors should be given WHO-recommended protective gear and facilities at hospitals while treating patients.

Officials said that at least 67 police and several government officials were also infected with coronavirus till Sunday.

The government has already announced various stimulus packages worth Tk 95,619 crore, which is 3.3 percent of the GDP.

On April 15, Bangladesh Bank announced that bankers will get a month's basic salary if they work at least 10 days during the ongoing shutdown.

The central bank order also said that contractual staffers at banks will get 65 percent of their salaries as special incentive, which will range from a minimum of Tk 30,000 to a maximum of Tk 100,000.

US says China should stop 'bullying behaviour' in S China Sea

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

The United States called on China on Saturday to stop "bullying behaviour" in the South China Sea and said it was concerned by reports of Beijing's "provocative actions" aimed at offshore oil and gas developments in the disputed waters.

Three regional security sources told Reuters on Friday that a Chinese government survey ship was tagging an exploration vessel operated by Malaysia's state oil company Petronas in those waters.

The vessel HaiyangDizhi 8 was earlier this week spotted off Vietnam, where it had last year conducted suspected oil exploration surveys in large expanses of Vietnam's exclusive economic zone.

"The United States is concerned by reports of China's repeated provocative actions aimed at the offshore oil and gas development of other claimant states," the U.S. State Department said in an emailed statement in response to questions on the HaiyangDizhi 8's presence in Malaysian waters.

"In this instance, (China) should cease its bullying behaviour and refrain from engaging in this type of provocative and destabilizing activity," it said.

China's actions threaten regional energy security and undermine the free and open Indo-Pacific energy market, it added.

Earlier in the week, when the survey ship was off Vietnam, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman had said the ship was conducting normal activities and accused U.S. officials of smearing Beijing.

China claims almost all of the resource-rich South China Sea, also a major trade route. The Philippines, Brunei, Vietnam, Malaysia and Taiwan have overlapping claims.

The HaiyangDizhi 8 was still within Malaysia's exclusive economic zone, Marine Traffic data showed on Saturday. The area is close to waters claimed by both Vietnam and Malaysia as well as by China.