

'We'll get you home soon'

Govt assures stranded Bangladeshis in India; flights for treatment seekers to start today

RASHIDUL HASAN and JAMIL MAHMUD

With several thousand Bangladeshis passing days in hardship in stranded situations in India for over a month, the government yesterday urged Bangladeshi citizens to have patience, assuring them of their gradual repatriation after bringing back patients from South India.

In a major development, US-Bangla Airlines will start operating eight special flights from today to bring back over 1,000 stranded Bangladeshis who went there for treatment. Six flights will be operated from Chennai from April 20 to 25 while two from Kolkata will be operated on April 21 and April 23, Kamrul Islam, general manager (public relations) of the airline, told The Daily Star.

Meanwhile, for several hundred Bangladeshis stranded in Malaysia, the government has said the Malaysian government is assisting the expatriate Bangladeshis as the Bangladesh high commission is closely working in this regard with the Southeast Asian country.

In a video message on Saturday night, State Minister for Foreign Affairs M Shahriar Alam urged the stranded Bangladeshis in India to have patience.

"We will not put any of our citizens abroad in unbearable sufferings," he said. He urged the Bangladeshis, including students, not to create any untoward

situation there, saying Bangladesh's positive image is linked to their behaviour.

Shahriar said the ministry and Bangladesh high commission in India were in constant touch with the Indian authorities for the Bangladeshis' wellbeing, especially around 300 students of Lovely Professional University in Punjab.

He said the Bangladesh government has already brought back some citizens from India by road via Kolkata and sent them to quarantine with help of local administration.

According to the state minister, Bangladeshis including students of some universities, tourists and those who went for medical treatment remained stranded in several Indian cities including Kolkata, Chennai, Bangalore and Mumbai.

India has been under lockdown since March 25 which was extended till May 3.

Sources said of the stranded Bangladeshis, around 600 are Tablighi Jamaat men; at least 1,000 in Chennai and Vellore who went mostly for medical treatment, and there are several hundreds more in Bangalore and Hyderabad. Many Bangladeshis in India are suffering from financial crisis in the current situation.

Meanwhile in Malaysia, some 250 to 300 Bangladeshis students had been stranded and also passing days in financial hardship due to air communication suspension

SEE PAGE 4 COL 5



Conservancy workers under Dhaka North City Corporation sort and pick up garbage in a truck, without any gloves. Though some of them are wearing masks, that barely offer any protection from Covid-19 that may arrive with someone's household waste. This photo was taken in Mirpur's Senpara area on Saturday afternoon.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

CONTAINING COVID-19 PM to hold video conference with officials of 8 dists

BSS, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will hold a video conference with the public representatives and officials of eight districts of Dhaka and Mymensingh divisions today on the present coronavirus situation in the country.

"The video conference will start at 10am at the prime minister's official Gono Bhaban residence," PM's Press Secretary Ihsanul Karim told the news agency yesterday.

The districts are Manikganj, Gazipur, Tangail and Kishoreganj of Dhaka division and Jamalpur, Sherpur, Netrakona and Mymensingh of Mymensingh division.

Bangladesh Television, Bangladesh Betar and private TV channels and radio stations will broadcast the video conference live, the press secretary said.

Earlier, the prime minister exchanged views with the public representatives and officials of 40 districts of Dhaka, Chattogram, Khulna, Sylhet and Barishal divisions in three phases.

During the meetings, the premier announced various stimulus packages and steps to overcome the Covid-19 fallout as well as gave different directives to contain the spread of the virus.

Lack of ICU beds remains a worry in Sylhet division

Three out of four districts have none

DWOHA CHOWDHURY, Sylhet

While it may sound reassuring to hear that Sylhet division has 589 beds dedicated to treating Covid-19 patients in isolation centres. However, that enthusiasm might start to fade in the face of some details -- out of these 589, only two are ICU beds.

Both of these are located at the "Corona Isolation Centre" in Sylhet city's Saheed Shamsuddin Ahmed Hospital.

Though nine more ICU beds and four ventilators are being installed at this dedicated Covid-19 treatment facility, medical experts say this will not be enough if the contagion continues to spread.

According to the divisional health office in Sylhet, there are a total of 103 ICU facilities in Sylhet, which includes 15 functional beds at Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital, while the rest are at private medical colleges and

hospitals in the district.

However, there is no ICU facility available across Sunamganj, Moulvibazar and Habiganj districts; not even at the Sheikh Hasina Medical College Hospital in Habiganj.

According to the fourth version of 'National Guidelines on Clinical Management of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19)', critically ill patients should be treated in intensive care units (ICU).

Professor AFM Nazmul Islam, former head of the department of medicine at Osmani Medical College, said, "A patient's vital functions are respiration, circulation, blood pressure and oxygenation, all of which are functions of the lungs and heart. Those who cannot maintain vital functions need to be taken to intensive care. Around five percent of the total Covid-19 infected get to a critical stage where this care is

required."

"Considering the population density of the country, if we estimate one lakh infected cases, at least five thousand of them will be critical, and at least one to two thousand of them will need ICU facility. It's time to plan beforehand as cases keep rising every day," he said.

So far, only seven people have tested Covid-19 positive in the division, including a deceased doctor and an elderly. Moreover, one was detained in Sunamganj after fleeing from Dhaka after testing positive.

Among them, three are being treated at Sylhet Saheed Shamsuddin Ahmed Hospital, two in Sunamganj Sadar Hospital and one in Habiganj Sadar Hospital.

Contacted, Civil Surgeons of Sunamganj, Moulvibazar and Habiganj all said that they have sent requisition for

SEE PAGE 4 COL 2

BAF flight with testing kits, PPE returns to Dhaka

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

An aircraft of Bangladesh Air Force (BAF) carrying medical aid returned to Dhaka yesterday from China.

The supplies were transported by BAF C-130J transport aircraft under 'In Aid to Civil Power' by Armed Forces Division, a press release issued by Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) said.

The supplies include necessary coronavirus detection kits, 12,22,000 surgical masks, 7,500 N-95 masks, 130 thermometers, 2,000 gloves, 10,200 medical safety glasses, 200 goggles and 10,459 personal protective equipment (PPE).

More healthcare aid (PPE, masks and sanitisers etc) collected from China were brought by the same aircraft to provide to various entities engaged in combating coronavirus in Bangladesh under the initiative of the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce.

On Friday, a total of 16 crew members of Bangladesh Air Force departed from Shah Amanat International Airport in Chattogram for China by BAF C-130J aircraft.

Air Commodore Md Zahidur Rahman GD(P) of Bangladesh Air Force led the team, added the press release.



Deprived of wages for 12 weeks, some 1,000 workers of Kaliti tea garden yesterday brought out a 7km long march towards Kulaura upazila in Moulvibazar from their workplace, as they have been facing food crisis amid the ongoing shutdown. They gave a 24-hour ultimatum to the owner to meet an 11-point demand including payment of the arrears and repair of their houses. Inset, they demonstrated after reaching School Choumuhona area in the upazila.

PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

A simple act of kindness Bangladeshi woman making masks in USA

TAMANNA KHAN

On March 25, The New York Times ran a story about Americans stepping up to face the coronavirus pandemic by sewing masks for their healthcare providers as well as the general public.

Nayeema Ahmad, a non-resident Bangladeshi living in Oak Ridge, Tennessee for the last 32 years, is also making a contribution during these trying times.

The retired high school science teacher, now in her 60s, has made more than 100 masks since March 17 and sent them to doctors in Massachusetts, Virginia and California.

Talking to this correspondent over WhatsApp, she said the first request came from the daughter-in-law of a friend.

"She is a pediatrician at an emergency clinic in Massachusetts," Nayeema said, adding that the doctor sent her a message with a link that had instructions on making masks, and requested Nayeema to make

some to meet the urgent demand.

Using leftover fabric she had at home and some elastic and wire from the store, Nayeema could easily produce some masks at home.

She mailed the masks to hospitals and clinics. She uses different patterned and coloured cotton fabric for making the two-layered mask with a small pocket-like opening, where users can insert coffee filters for added protection.

"They are washable and reusable," she said, explaining that the doctor in Massachusetts used hers over an N95 mask, to prolong its longevity. In the USA, there is a shortage of N95 masks that can effectively filter out coronavirus.

After Nayeema sent the first batch of masks to Massachusetts, more requests came in as information about her small initiative spread through word of mouth.

"I also gave a couple of masks to my general practitioner," she said.

SEE PAGE 4 COL 4

RMG workers take to streets for arrears

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Savar

Around 400 workers and employees of Mars Design Ltd in Savar's Hemayetpur demonstrated in front of their factory yesterday, demanding overdue salaries.

They said four months' salaries of factory employees and two months' salaries of workers are still pending.

Authorities promised multiple times to pay their dues, but to no avail, they said. They only paid a lump sum amount of money through bKash several days ago, said workers.

"During the protest, the factory owner rushed to the spot around 1pm and assured us again of paying our salaries by April 27," said a worker, adding that Industrial Police also requested them to go back.

The demonstrators left the spot around 3pm.

Jane Alam Khan, assistant superintendent of Dhaka Industrial Police-1, told The Daily Star that workers kept calm after the assurance.

Khairul Mamun Mintu, organising secretary of Garments Shramik Trade Union Kendra, said they will go for tougher movement if the factory authorities do not follow the deadline.

This correspondent could not reach the factory administration manager Mohammad Nahid as his phone remained switched off.

From farm to doorsteps Buying directly from farmers, Swapno Chaka delivers to middle-income families in need

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Voluntary organisation Swapno Chaka has taken an initiative to deliver food among middle-income families for free, who cannot publicly seek support over the financial crisis following the coronavirus outbreak.

But more importantly, the organisation is buying the food items, which include a variety of vegetables, directly from farmers to help them sustain during the crisis period.

The organisation delivers essentials like rice, lentil, potato and oil among 100 families in different areas of Dhaka between 10am and 4pm daily.

"We have two hotline numbers -- 01766622202 and 01766622204. Once someone seeks support from us by calling these two numbers, we send the food items through our eight riders," KM Abul Hasnat, founder of Swapno Chaka, told The Daily Star.

Hasnat said the service was primarily introduced in Gulshan in support of the Gulshan Division of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, but people from all over Dhaka are now calling for support.

Sudip Chakraborty, deputy commissioner of Gulshan Division Police, said, "We are trying our best to come up with innovative ideas with the help of different volunteer groups to provide support to city dwellers so that they can stay home safely."

Asked about helping the middle class, Hasnat said, "We have decided to provide assistance to the middle-income families, who often hesitate to come out to the

streets to seek support."

Regarding financial support, Hasnat said they have a club called "Ninety Six-Ninety Eight", which now has 800 members. "We have collected funds from our friends and are using that to support the families in need."

SUPPORT FOR FARMERS

Meanwhile, the organisation has also decided to extend its support for the root-level farmers who are not getting proper prices for their vegetables during this crisis period.

Swapno Chaka started buying vegetables directly from the field and they would distribute three kilogrammes of vegetables for free along with rice and lentil to the needy families in Dhaka from today (April 20), said members.

"The farmers are forced to sell their vegetables like tomato, cucumber and bottle gourd for Tk 1 per kg. Many are even unable to sell any," said Razib Al Masud, a member of Swapno Chaka. "We have selected a union in Dinajpur district to collect the vegetables. Through this process, we will be able to help farmers and the needy people," said Razib, also the deputy commissioner of Detective Branch of DMP.

Apart from distributing vegetables, the organisation plans to sell a portion of it to members of the club and friends so that they can cover the expenses, added Razib.

"We have already bought 10 tonnes of vegetables and we would distribute five tonnes of it for free among the needy families and we would sell and deliver the rest after making 20kg packages each," said

SEE PAGE 4 COL 4



A volunteer of the organisation delivering food packages for elderly sex workers in Narayanganj's Kashipur area recently.

PHOTO: COLLECTED