

Restore mobile data in Rohingya camps

25 rights activists, researchers, dev professionals ask govt

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Twenty five rights activists, researchers and development professionals have urged the government to resume 4G mobile internet inside the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar to ensure flow of information that could help prevent coronavirus transmission.

The refugees are at high risk of contracting Covid-19 as they live in congested camps, they said, acknowledging that Bangladesh demonstrated humanity by giving shelter to some 1.1 million of them.

The average population density in Bangladesh is 1,116 per square kilometre, but it is 70,000 in the Rohigya camps in Ukhia and Teknaf upazilas, they said in a statement yesterday.

"Though there is a compulsion of maintaining social distance, it is not enforceable properly in the Rohingya camps. Therefore, if somehow there is a Covid-19 outbreak, it will fast spread across the camps as well as the local communities," said the statement.

Despite efforts from government, national and international agencies, there is shortage of water, sanitation and hygiene arrangements in the camps, it added.

It is imperative to cooperate with the aid agencies so they can reach out to the camps both physically and virtually to create awareness on

Beaten for demanding dues

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the workers under the direction of the factory authorities.

The workers just went to the factory to receive their wages on the day fixed by the authorities, which was yesterday, Billal said, adding that, instead of getting paid, the workers were beaten mercilessly.

"We also filed a written complaint with Dhaka Industrial Police-1 in this regard," he added.

Contacted, Hossen Ali, a member of Savar's Ashulia Union Parishad, denied the allegation of any involvement of his men in the incident.

Razon, manager (Administration) of Elain Appeals Ltd, also denied the allegation made by the workers.

"I do not know who attacked the workers. We informed them [the workers] that the dues will be paid on Tuesday as we did not go to the factory today [yesterday]," he said.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Jan-e-Alam Khan, assistant superintendent of police Dhaka Industrial Police-1, said, "It is unacceptable that outsiders will come and beat up workers. We are looking into the matter."

Meanwhile, at least 1,000 workers of four factories in Savar and Ashulia yesterday demonstrated in front of the factories, demanding their salary for the month of March, according to workers' organisations.

More than 50,000 workers of over 100 garment factories in Chattogram have also not been paid their salaries for March as yet.

Of the 100 factories, 35 are registered with the BGMEA, and 45,000 of the 50,000 workers are employed in those factories.

According to the BGMEA, Industrial Police, Chattogram EPZ and Karnafuli EPZ, more than five lakh workers are working in the 711 garment factories in Chattogram.

At least 100 garments factories have not paid the wages for March till yesterday, despite the labour ministry's order to clear the wages within April 16.

MA Salam, first vice president of the BGMEA, told The Daily Star that a few factories failed to pay salaries because

Plasma therapy

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lives as there is no medicine for Covid-19 available yet, and that the drugs under trial may take months for mass production, the hematologist said.

Presently, only supportive care is given to the Covid-19 patients, and more than 165,903 people have already died worldwide. In Bangladesh, at least a hundred people, including a doctor died with 2,948 confirmed cases found so far.

"The elderly people who are critically ill and health workers could be the priority groups for administration of this plasma therapy, because if doctors and health personnel die due to infection, who will take care of the patients?" said Dr Khan.

It is better to administer the COVID-19 plasma therapy in the initial stage of infection. In that case, its effectiveness level is much higher than that of the critical stage.

"The reason is that initially organism or virus is likely to be much smaller than that of established disease as well check the cytokine storm."

Trials are going on in different states in the US and China to learn of more precision of the plasma therapy.

Plasma therapy was used effectively before the specific treatment was developed for H1N1 influenza (Spanish

Covid-19, it said.

The service providers are facing challenges in creating awareness and sharing information because mobile data has been suspended there since September last year, they said.

Some locals have symptoms of Covid-19, but they are not being able to communicate with the officials concerned. Also, it is urgent for the health personnel to learn the information from the Rohingya camps.

"We, therefore, request the Bangladesh government to restore mobile internet service immediately and help prevent the Covid-19 among the Rohingya as well as the local communities."

The rights activists and researchers also expressed concern over the fact that Malaysia and Thailand recently refused to shelter the boats carrying some 500 Rohingyas.

They lauded Bangladesh for rescuing nearly 400 Rohingyas last week after they were refused entry by Malaysian authorities when their boat was in the Malaysian water.

Signatories to the statement include Meghna Guhathakurta, Prof Parveen Hasan, Zafrrulla Chowdhury, Manzoor Hasan, Farah Kabir, Shaheen Anam, Rezaul Karim Chowdhury, Mahean Sultan, Rehnuma Ahmed, Swapan Adnan, Noor Khan Liton, Farida Akter and Shireen Huq.

most of the European and American buyers cancelled or postponed their work orders due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Most of the factories will pay the salaries within this week and some may pay at the end of this month, BGMEA officials said, adding the factories that are not members of any organisation are more likely to be late with their payment.

According to the BGMEA, among the 324 of their registered factories in Chattogram, 299 factories have paid the wages for March to their workers by yesterday.

Bin Mesbah, general manager of KEPZ, told The Daily Star that only four factories of the KEPZ area had failed to pay their workers' salary for March until yesterday.

"We contacted the top officials of those factories and they ensured us that they will pay all salaries by April 28," he said.

Md Shahadat Hossain, deputy general manager of CEPZ, said, "We asked 13 factories to pay last month's salaries to their workers within this month. Five of those made the payments today [yesterday]. The rest ensured us that they will pay their workers by April 28."

Lockdown in 3 Madagascar cities set to ease

AFP, Antananarivo

The coronavirus lockdown imposed in Madagascar's three main cities was to be progressively lifted from yesterday, President Andry Rajoelina said, adding that a Malgache "remedy" for the disease had been successfully tested.

"We are going to progressively re-establish normal life for the people and their means of subsistence," Rajoelina said in a TV address late Sunday.

"We are going to start by doing for it for half a day, in the mornings from 6:00 am to 1:00 pm."

virus), Ebola, SARS-1 and MERS virus, he said.

"I have already proposed to the Communicable Disease Control unit of the DG health. If they approve, we need to develop a protocol and then go for administering the therapy as a trial basis initially," he said.

Protocol means the rules of how to collect plasma, its preservation method, how to measure the level of antibody at the donor's plasma, dosing as well as measuring the outcome of the therapy etc.

As there are many patients recovering from Covid-19, it is very much possible to introduce the plasma therapy in Bangladesh, he added.

"What we need to do is to prepare a database of those who recovered from covid-19 and then take their consent for plasma collection. Accordingly, we can collect plasma maintaining the protocol," he said.

There is no legal bar for collecting plasma. It's more or less safe and like the way people donate blood, he said. Any recovered person of 18 to 60 yrs age group with 50kg body weight without diseases like HBV, HCB, HIV, malaria, syphilis can donate plasma.

"People should be inspired to donate plasma. We need to save lives with whatever options available we have," Dr Khan said.



Sitting on a pavement, a group of people waits for a truck of Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) in the capital's Malibagh Raigate area to buy daily essentials at cheaper prices. The truck was scheduled to arrive at 9:30am, but it came 15 minutes after this photo was taken around 12:30pm.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

Good move amid myriad challenges

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The harvest of Boro, the principal crop of the country, has already begun in haor areas of Mymensingh and Sylhet divisions. In other regions, it will start from early May.

The Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) in Sylhet division, the biggest hub of Boro rice cultivation, is expecting 25,83,115 tonnes of yield from the division alone this year.

Farmers harvesting paddy in haor regions are happy with the current yield.

Bidhan Krishna Sarker, a farmer from Khalaijuri upazila in Netrokona cultivated Boro in 20 acres of land.

"I am getting at least 80 to 85 maund (40 kg) of rice per acre. I have not seen such a good production in the last few years," said Bidhan on Friday morning, while cutting paddy in his field.

Mozammel Haque of Mendipur village in the upazila told The Daily Star that he sold one maund of paddy at Tk 780 last week (Tk 19.5 per kg).

"Most farmers in our area have harvested and sold paddy at the rate," he said.

Last year, the price of Boro paddy was below Tk 500 per maund (Tk 12.5 per kg).

WILL FARMERS BENEFIT?

The good yield and the government's decision to increase paddy procurement are not reassuring for farmers.

They said the government's procurement process of selecting rice growers through a lottery system often benefits non-farmers such as traders and local political men, instead of small and marginal farmers and sharecroppers.

They alleged that political connection or bribe is often required to make it to the lottery list.

Besides, farmers often cannot bring the moisture content of their freshly cut paddy below 14 percent as required by the government.

Ali Hossain, a farmer in Chalan Beel area, could not sell paddy to the government because of this rule, even though he was selected at the lottery.

He said rice traders, mostly belonging to the ruling party, own facilities where they can dry paddy as per the government criteria.

They buy identity cards from village farmers selected through the lottery, and supply paddy -- bought at a lower price from farmers -- to local depots, mostly located in upazilas headquarters, at the higher rate fixed by the government.

"Last year, the traders bought farmers' cards for Tk 4,000 to Tk 6,000 each," he said, adding that the sales proceeds of the cards are the only profit the farmers get.

When farmers harvest paddy, the grains have a moisture level of 18 percent. After that, even if the paddy is dried several times on farmyards with mud surface, the moisture level does not come down below 16 percent, said an upazila food officer.

"If a farmer does not dry his rice on a concrete surface, it is not possible to reduce the moisture level down to 14 percent. So marginal farmers have to take care of their paddy separately if they want to sell it to a government depot," he said.

"But farmers are often in a hurry to sell their crops. Taking advantage of this, rice mill owners and traders are selling paddy to the government," said a food directorate official, seeking anonymity.

If the moisture content is higher than 14 percent, the paddy weight would fall by at least 1kg per maund (40kg) after a month, he added.

The discrepancy in the purchase weight would then put the official in charge of the local supply depot in trouble, the food official said.

Explaining how the lottery system creates problems in the procurement

process, he said sometimes, the lottery generates names of farmers, who do not have rice to sell or are not willing to sell.

Even then, the farmers are pursued to sell their product because of the system, the food official added.

POSSIBLE SOLUTION?

Farmers opine they would benefit if the government buys paddy directly from them by setting up purchasing centres in large paddy haats.

Asked about this, Food Minister Sadhan Chandra Majumder said the government would not be able to buy paddy from a haat at a rate higher than market price.

The government would have to go by the price set by the market if they buy from haats, he said.

"Also, there is the problem of moisture. If we do not maintain the moisture level, the quantity of paddy will reduce after a few days. Also, we have to spend money on transporting rice to the local depot. It is a matter of huge cost," the minister said, questioning who would bear the transportation cost.

Quazi Shahabuddin, former director general of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, welcomed the government's move to increase paddy procurement saying more farmers will benefit from this.

He, however, urged the government to relax the moisture content regulation and accept the loss in weight for the current Boro season.

About buying paddy from haats, Shahabuddin said, it would take some time to eliminate the middlemen involved in the paddy trade.

The government has engaged the International Food Policy Research Institute to come up with the most effective ways of procuring paddy that will benefit farmers, said Akhter Ahmed, country representative of the research organisation.

the brunt

doctors are from Sir Salimullah Medical College and Mitford Hospital in the capital, and 14 each from Narayanganj Sadar Hospital and

Sheikh Fazilatunnesa Mujib Memorial KPJ Specialized Hospital and Nursing College.

WHAT AUTHORITIES SAY

Contacted, Habibur Rahman Khan, additional secretary (admin wing) of the Health Services Division of the health and family welfare ministry, blamed some patients' tendency to hide information about Covid-19 symptoms for the large number of doctors getting infected with the virus.

"This is the reason why the doctors treating patients at general hospitals were affected the most, not the ones working at the hospitals for Covid-19 patients," he told this newspaper.

About the allegation of poor quality of PPEs, he said the PPEs provided by the government are "up to the mark". But taking advantage of the situation, some factories are producing "low quality" PPEs which were provided to doctors by many individuals.

He also mentioned that the health minister had already warned that action would be taken against those factories.

ENSURE SAFETY: DHE

Doctors for Health and Environment, an association of doctors, placed a nine-point demand that includes ensuring safety of doctors and other health workers.

In a statement yesterday, the organisation said though the government got enough time to contain the spread of Covid-19, "negligence" and a lack of understanding about the severity of the pandemic are the key reasons behind this "dire situation".

The organisation said it has been giving suggestions to the government from the beginning, but those went unheeded.

It alleged that doctors and other health workers have been deprived of necessary safety gears, resulting in infection among around 200 doctors.

Many people, including doctors, are facing harassment for portraying the real picture of the shortage of safety gears, it mentioned urging the authorities to take steps to stop it.

The platform also demanded that the government take measures to curb corruption in procurement and distribution of medical equipment and relief materials.

Grim milestone

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Four of the deceased were aged above 60, four between 51 and 60 while two between 41 and 50, she said.

Among the newly-infected patients, 19.5 percent are from Gazipur, 13.5 percent from Kishoreganj and six percent from Narsingdi.

"We see Gazipur as an area with increasing number of cases. Many of the newly infected ones in other districts went there from Dhaka city and Narayanganj," Dr Nasima said.

ACTION IF MISINFORMATION SPREAD

In the bulletin, which was aired online, Brig Gen Dr Md Shahidullah, director of the Central Medical Stores Depot, warned of taking action against anyone spreading misinformation on the standard of protective gears the CMSD supplies to hospitals.

"The standard and the prices of all PPEs received by CMSD are fixed by the drug administration. Before those are received, a technical committee of the DGHS examined them. During the distribution, another committee of the CMSD also examines the quality," Shahidullah said.

The CMSD follows the Public Procurement Rule 2008 for this, he said.

He said 70 percent of the protective gowns are produced and supplied by local companies. "These are made as per the DGDA's [Directorate General of Drug Administration] guideline."

Mentioning that there is shortage of N95 masks globally, he said, "No company in Bangladesh can make it. We depend on import and it takes four to seven weeks to reach the country through the sea channel. Via air, it takes 15 days."

"Currently we have one lakh such masks in our stock."

So far, the CMSD has bought protective gears worth Tk 176 core and was distributing gears worth Tk 14.67 lakh every day, he added.

The CMSD, which is under the DGHS, is determined to take legal measures against any person or institution trying to spread rumours regarding its activities and equipment supplied by it, he warned.

5 die

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Health Organisation guidelines, he said.

At a tea garden in Moulvibazar's Juri upazila, a 20-year-old man died yesterday morning after suffering from fever, persistent cough and breathing problems for a few days, Upazila Health Officer Samarjit Singha told our correspondent in the district.

Another 20-year-old man died at home in Lakshmipur's Ramgati on Sunday night, our Noakhali correspondent reported quoting Health Officer Abdur Rahman.

He died with fever and breathing problems, Rahman added.

In Kurigram's Ulipur upazila, a 37-year-old man died at home with fever, sore throat, headache and cold on Sunday night.

The man recently travelled to the upazila from Tangail with the symptoms, Civil Surgeon Habibur Rahman of Kurigram told our Lalmonirhat correspondent.

In Dinajpur's Khansama upazila, a 60-year-old brick kiln worker died Sunday evening soon after reaching home from Narsingdi.

He was suffering from fever, cold, cough and breathing problems, UNO Ahmed Mahbub-ul-Islam said, quoting family members.

Bangabandhu

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of Police Headquarters, said they did not get any information about Moslem's arrest from India yet.

On the other hand, some ruling Awami League leaders on their Facebook posts said Bangabandhu killer Moslem was detained in India.

According to a report of Kolkata-based media, Moslem was living in Thakumagar area of North 24 Parganas. He was running a traditional herbal medicine shop there, identifying himself as Dr Dutta.

Anandabazar, a popular Bangla newspaper in India, reported that Dhaka informed the Indian intelligence that it would be tough for them to take back Moslem to the country after arresting him from India due to the ongoing lockdown.

The Indian intelligence handed over Moslem to the Bangladesh intelligence at an unguarded bordering point after his arrest, it reports, quoting Indian intelligence source.

According to sources, Moslem, along with other Bangabandhu killers, were present on Dhanmondi Road-32 on August 15, 1975, when Bangabandhu and most of his family members were assassinated.

Majed was arrested in the capital's Gabtoli on April 7, claimed Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit of Dhaka Metropolitan Police.

He was hanged in Dhaka Central Jail at Keraniganj around 12:01am on April 12.

"Majed said he arrived in the country on March 15 or 16 from Kolkata. He claimed that he was hiding there for about 23 years," said Hemayet Uddin Khan, assistant public prosecutor of a Dhaka court.