

Some RMG factories

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Khulna, according to industrial police.

Of these factories, 480 are members of the BGMEA, 121 BKMEA, 58 Bangladesh Textile Mills Association, and 198 under Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority. There are 570 other factories that have reopened, officials said.

Meanwhile, at least 650 factories have not paid their employees as of yesterday leading to sporadic protests, police sources said.

In Ashulia, many workers, who travelled miles on foot a day ago to join work, complained that they were turned away from their factory gates because the management wanted to keep fewer people inside, said Khairul Mamun Mintu, organising secretary of Bangladesh Garments Workers Trade Union Centre.

The management should have asked only those who were needed at the factory to travel all the way from their villages, he told The Daily Star.

DEMONSTRATIONS

Over 300 sacked workers in Ashulia's Tajpur area demonstrated inside their factory.

The protesters told our correspondent that they found out that they have been laid off after they went to the factory.

Alam Khan, assistant superintendent at Dhaka Industrial Police-1, said police teams were deployed near the factory and officers were talking to the management.

Around 1,000 workers of four other factories in Savar and Ashulia demonstrated in front of their factories demanding last month's salary, labour leaders said.

Several hundred workers of eight factories demonstrated in Narayanganj, a hotspot of the coronavirus outbreak, denouncing layoffs and demanding arrears. A couple of hundred workers

also blocked Dhaka-Narayanganj highway.

Workers were fired from at least 72 factories in Narayanganj, officials said.

There were protests also in Tongi and Gazipur demanding arrears.

BGMEA STATEMENT

"The staggered approach has been adopted so that they [factory managements] cannot all rush at one go and so that the influx of workers can be avoided," said a message sent by the association.

"What we have given is a general outline of the reopening. There are factories who have opened and have written to us...These factories, few in numbers, have started operating in a limited scale," BGMEA said in a WhatsApp message yesterday.

Govt targets

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Asked, Prof Azad of DGHS also admitted that there was a lack of expertise among those who collect samples on the field.

Asked about the testing kits, Nasima Sultana, additional director general at DGHS, said, "We have sufficient number of kits and more kits are coming. Kits will not be a problem."

She said more doctors, nurses and technologists would be recruited soon to solve the manpower crisis.

Contacted, Be-Nazir Ahmed, former director (disease control) of DGHS, said the more tests we can perform the more accurate picture we would get. That would help us to take more accurate programmes to contain the virus spread.

Although officials did not disclose the number of kits they have, IEDCR sources said the institution has around 30,000 kits stored.

Coronavirus infections in Bangladesh crossed the 5,000 mark yesterday after five more deaths and 418 new cases. The country tested 3,473 samples in the last 24 hours.

Social protection initiatives

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The report iterates the necessity of preventing job losses and providing social protection to those rendered unemployed.

"In Cambodia, Bangladesh and Myanmar, smaller garment factories are closing down due to the pandemic and, as a consequence, shedding jobs that were mostly held by women. In Bangladesh, where 45 percent of the population is vulnerable to falling into poverty, garment factories are crucial for providing incomes, especially to the near-poor," said the report, prepared by RBAP Economist Network.

The report also iterates the necessity of cash transfers and floats the idea of a universal basic income to make sure that the unemployed do not go without any income.

"A temporary UBI payment can boost aggregate demand, help vulnerable people maintain their livelihoods and consumption levels, as various industries shed jobs owing to declining demand or payment difficulties. Importantly, owing to its universality, it reaches the most vulnerable in society that traditional social programmes often cannot," stated the report.

The report criticised "targeted social protection schemes", which are schemes where the recipient has to meet a large number of criterion to receive social protection as being prone to corruption.

"Targeted social protection schemes, despite lower overall costs, have higher administrative costs and may not be immune from considerable leakages [non-poor receiving support while poor being excluded from support]. Moreover, in the context of the current crisis, creating new targeted social protection schemes is unrealistic," said the report.

Another sad milestone

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capital while 32.82 percent are from the other upazilas in Dhaka and the districts belong to Dhaka division.

Narayanganj remained the second-worst affected district with 625 cases followed by Gazipur with 308.

Among the other divisions, Chattogram and Mymensingh shared around four percent positive cases each.

Meanwhile, nine more have recovered from Covid-19, taking the total number of recovery cases to 122, Prof Nasima added.

A total of 1,164 people were put under isolation so far in the country.

Of the 97,132 people so far put under isolation, 79,899 people are still in quarantine.

GOVT SAYS NO SHORTAGE OF TESTING KITS

During this 24-hour, samples of 3,473 individuals were tested in 22 Covid-19 testing labs across the country.

A total of 46,589 samples were tested in the country since January 28 when the first test was conducted.

Prof Nasima also informed that Covid-19 testing has been expanded to three more laboratories, taking the total number of labs to 25.

In addition, it suggested that data be gathered on the informal sector.

"Mechanisms to register informal groups and consolidating their data to bring them under formal mechanisms will be necessary. Thailand, for instance, has asked both formal and informal companies affected by the lockdown to register with the government by a certain date to bring in informal workers and others outside the formal coverage of current social protection systems."

Furthermore, the report warned that stimulus packages have to be governed to ward off mismanagement like using the package to raise executive salaries.

"Stimulus packages can attach simple, development-oriented conditions to the support provided, such as requiring companies to preserve their employment levels and pay wages; or where feasible to use funds received to produce goods and services directly needed to strengthen the health system and its ability to contain, treat, and eventually, beat the virus," stated the report.

The report also warned the countries against depending on international development assistance, and asked them to contain fiscal deficits.

"It is key to review existing budgetary priorities -- notably tax exemptions and glaring instances of tax evasion and avoidance on the revenue side, and fossil fuel subsidies, discretionary payments, "white elephant" projects on the expenditure side," said the report.

As a final recommendation, the report asked governments to review existing policies and make this the norm and not see these measures as a temporary band-aid.

The new labs have been set up at Abdur Rahim Medical College in Dinajpur, Kusthia Medical College and Chattogram Veterinary and Animal Science University.

Despite the number of laboratories has been increased in the last few days, the number of tests has not gone up correspondingly; it is still near around 3,000 every day -- which is far too low provided the level of transmission and size of the population.

Although the authorities are yet to lay bare the reason behind the inadequate number of tests, media reports indicate that shortage of testing kits might have been the cause.

Prof Nasima Sultana, however, dismissed the claim that they have any shortage of kits and other testing equipment.

"We are regularly importing test kits and we have enough supply of the kits," she said without mentioning the number of kits they currently have at their disposal.

It is to note that the DGHS stopped taking questions from the journalists during briefing two weeks ago.

Experts blamed many cases have been remaining undetected due to the small number of tests.



SOCIAL NEARING ... Hundreds of workers, with inches of space between them, climb a foot bridge at Chattogram's EPZ intersection after, inset, crowding out of factories on the first day of resuming their work in the port city yesterday.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

As informal as ignored

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are finished," said day labourer Mokhlesur Rahman, a father of three, who left Dhaka for his village in Baufal of Patuakhali immediately after the government order was declared.

Ayub Ali, an interior decoration contractor, was working on the decoration of a shop at Pir Yemeni Market. After the market was closed on March 21, he too left for his home in Dogachi village of Pabna. He is now looking for a microcredit loan to support his family.

"Back in the village, I worked as a labourer at a local brick kiln for around 10 days in order to support my family. But it was also then shut down," said Ayub, adding 10 workers under his supervision are also going through hard times.

Toju Mia, a plumber in the capital's Gendaria, said he last worked at an under-construction building in the Sutrapur area in mid-March. "I sought some time from my landlord to pay rent. But I still don't know how I will pay him," he said.

Habibur Rahman Shiraz, chairman of the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), said the prime minister has issued strict directions on providing support to day labourers during the shutdown enforced to slow down coronavirus transmission.

"But there might have been some problems in executing this direction at the field level."

The Directorate of Labour, a regulatory agency under the labour ministry, has no database of construction workers. In contrast, the fisheries and livestock departments,

for example, have their own lists of informal workers in their respective sectors.

Shiraz, also labour secretary of the ruling Awami League, said the Jatiya Sramik League has a list of workers who are being given support accordingly. Asked about non-partisan workers and those affiliated with other political parties, he said they are providing support to all day labourers, including construction workers.

However, he acknowledged, preparing a list of day labourers in the construction sector is slightly problematic as they do not stay in the same place for a long time.

AKM Mizanur Rahman, director general of the Directorate of Labour, said they do not have any separate relief programmes for informal workers, such as those working in the construction sector.

"The government is centrally giving aid, we're assisting them," he said, confirming the directorate does not have a database of informal workers.

When asked about the delayed response, Mizanur cited the unprecedented crisis as reason for the time needed in responding to the labourers' needs.

The Daily Star tried to reach the State Minister for Labour and Employment, Begum Monnujan Sufian, over phone but she did not respond to these correspondents' calls or text message.

ASSOCIATIONS, TOO, UNHELPFUL "We are needed only for May Day programmes and political rallies. They use us. No leaders have called to know how we're passing our days," said

Sobhan Mia, a construction worker from Baufal of Patuakhali.

"We're drowning in debt, but no one is there to protect us."

According to construction workers' leaders, there are around 350 associations that supposedly look after the welfare of informal workers in the sector. But they too are not playing a noticeable role in addressing the workers' plight, so far.

Osman Ghani, president of Imarat Nirman Sramik Union Bangladesh, said around 1.8 lakh construction workers including masons, labourers, plumbers, electricians, and carpenters are registered to the organisation.

"On April 19, I submitted a list of 2,000 construction workers to the DC office for aid," he said. He added that his organisation does not have enough funding to address these labourers' situation.

Sheikh Mohammad Nurul Haque, general secretary of Bangladesh Nirman Sramik League, said the organisation has around 40 lakh members across the country.

"We are doing these services voluntarily as we have no financial capital centrally. We have to depend on government support and aid to support our members," he told The Daily Star.

As a part of arranging such support, Nurul said that they have asked their district committee members to apply to the local administration with the phone number and NID details of their members, so that these labourers can get the relief arranged by the government for all those in need.

Hidden cases now spreading virus

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Since January 28, all the 22 labs -- 10 in the capital and 12 outside -- assigned for testing suspected Covid-19 cases have tested 46,589 samples for the virus.

Asked, IEDCR Director Meerjady Sabrina Flora claimed that the number of asymptomatic patients would not be huge.

"We found 23 percent of all the Covid-19 cases asymptomatic," she told this newspaper yesterday.

Recently, eight IEDCR staffers tested positive for the virus but none of them had any symptoms.

"The IEDCR staffers have regular checkups as we deal with patients. None of the eight staffers showed any Covid-19 symptoms before the tests," said a doctor at the IEDCR, seeking anonymity.

Of them, six have already recovered without showing any signs of the disease while the other two are receiving treatment at the Infectious Diseases Hospital in the capital.

The doctor also mentioned a recent study by the Indian Council of Medical Research, which said 80 percent of the Covid-19 patients in India are asymptomatic.

"The number of such asymptomatic patients in Bangladesh could also be high," added the physician.

Recently, 25 staffers of a private hospital in the capital's Panthapath tested positive for the virus and none of them had any symptoms. Besides,

28 devotees at the Iskon temple in Swamibagh, who got infected with the virus, didn't show any symptoms.

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

Prof Ridwanur Rahman, a specialist in medicine and infectious diseases, termed the recent detection of asymptomatic cases "the tip of the iceberg".

"It is a proof of our assumption that there are many undetected cases. It is tougher to control virus transmission at this stage. The virus is being spread mostly by those carriers who are not approaching the authorities for tests.

"Since we are not carrying out enough tests, we don't have the real picture. What we are seeing is just the tip of the iceberg. It's not possible to reach any conclusion based on the existing data."

Contacted, former DGHS Director General Prof Shah Monir Hossain, assigned by the DGHS to advise on controlling and preventing Covid-19 in Dhaka region, said there are many asymptomatic cases across the country.

"We have now reached the fourth stage of virus transmission. This means community transmission is there. At this stage, it is essential to test the suspected cases and also those who came into contact with Covid-19 patients.

According to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), the fourth stage refers to the highest

level of transmission, and in this phase, community transmission happens in many areas of the country at the same time.

Prof Monir said, "A number of asymptomatic cases, who came into contact with Covid-19 patients, are being tested for the virus as part of the government's contact tracing activities across the country. Any asymptomatic carrier of the virus may develop symptoms a few days later. It is because of the incubation period.

"As per our epidemiological prediction, the number of positive cases will keep increasing in the next two weeks. Then it will begin to fall.

"But we are worried because our country is a densely populated one. If virus transmission happens among the low socio-economic groups [such as slum dwellers], the situation may worsen," he pointed out.

The Covid-19 is transmitted mainly through respiratory droplets expelled by someone who is coughing or has other symptoms such as fever or tiredness. Many of those infected with the virus don't show any symptoms.

This is particularly true at the early stages of the disease. It is possible to contract the virus from someone who has just a mild cough and does not feel ill.

Some reports have indicated that people with no symptoms can transmit the virus. It is still unknown how often it happens.

17 police officers killed by coronavirus in Peru

AFP, Lima

Seventeen police officers in Peru have died after contracting novel coronavirus while enforcing the nation's pandemic lockdown, officials and state media said.

Authorities admitted earlier this week that at least 1,300 officers had been infected by Covid-19.

On Saturday new interior minister Gaston Rodriguez, who was sworn in a day earlier after the sudden

resignation of his predecessor when the infections tally emerged, said: "We have 17 deceased police officers nationwide, 11 of them in Lima."

The high number is linked to "the exposure that police officers have when intervening with people who violate the measures issued to contain the spread of the coronavirus," state news agency Andina said Saturday.

Peru has been on lockdown since

March 16.

Rodriguez said his department had allocated 50 million soles (\$15 million) "for the purchase of protection elements such as masks and gloves" for Peru's police.

He added that roughly 220,000 Covid-19 tests for the force were due to arrive by the first week of May.

"We have an obligation to take care of them," said Rodriguez. "The police must be well equipped."

Validate our test kit

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CROs are the companies that are contracted by the Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA) for medical research.

"We then requested the DGDA to write which CRO we would go through, but it did not," Dr Zafrullah said.

He said CROs are contracted by the DGDA and therefore it should send the kits to them for testing, instead of Gonoshasthaya having to "directly go to the CROs".

Dr Zafrullah demanded that the government immediately make arrangements to start the process of kit validation.

"We don't know why the DGDA is handling the issue bureaucratically, when this is an emergency and we need to save lives. A day's delay may mean thousands of lives [lost]," he said.

Businesses and educational institutions are closed and that has had serious economic and social implications. There is pressures to reopen factories, he said, adding that their low-cost kit, which can lead to large-scale testing, is a must if businesses, and specifically factories, are to reopen.

The kit -- Rapid Dot Blot -- that was developed by a team of researchers of Gonoshasthaya Kendra is capable of testing antibody and antigen. Trials by Gonoshasthaya Kendra found its accuracy to be more than 90 percent.

The kit was supposed to be handed over to the DGDA on April 11, but it was not possible due to technical glitches at the factory of Gonoshasthaya-RNA Biotech Limited, a sister concern of Gonoshasthaya Kendra, although the Directorate General of Health Services had provided samples to Gonoshasthaya to be tested.

On April 12, DGDA again applied to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGDA) for blood samples of Covid-19 patients. The DGDA eventually provided it on April 23.

"Our scientists worked day and night to test the blood samples and prepare the kits. Now, when we are urging the DGDA to do its part by approving after validation, we see sheer disinterest. I don't know why. Some quarters may be misleading the DGDA," Zafrullah said.

Gonoshasthaya organised a handover ceremony at its Nagar Hospital on April 25, when the DGDA representatives were scheduled to attend and receive the kits, but there were none from the DGDA.

It handed over kit samples to the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University and the US Centre for Diseases Control and Prevention (CDC) for independent validation.

"As DGDA representatives did not come to the event, we contacted them and went there today, but we had no idea we had to face such bureaucracy," Zafrullah said.

"It is such a big emergency in Bangladesh, but some bureaucrats of the government are not realising it... they are more interested in private interest than that of public interest," he said.

Dr Firoz Ahmed, one of the researchers, said they want the prime minister's personal intervention to ensure that DGDA promptly arranges the validation process of the kit.

The team of researchers who developed the kit include Dr Bijon Kumar Sil, Nihad Adnan, Raed Jamiruddin, Firoz Ahmed and Mohib Ullah Khondokar.

Dr Bijon was among the researchers who had developed a kit to diagnose SARS coronavirus in 2003. Rapid Dot Blot is patented under his name.

CITIZENS CONCERNED

Fifty-five eminent personalities in a joint statement yesterday expressed concern over repressive measures against health workers and government's apathy to give approval to Gonoshasthaya Kendra's Covid-19 test kits.

"With deep concern, we are noticing the government's limitation to stem the spread of coronavirus is sending the people of the country to an uncertain future," said the statement.

The statement said that government limitations will be further exposed as it is taking repressive measure against doctors and health workers and government disinterest to give approval to Gonoshasthaya Kendra's and RNA Biotech limited Covid-19 test kits and its production, and publicly demeaning Gonoshasthaya Kendra founder and freedom fighter Zafrullah Chowdhury, the statement added.

Government is importing testing kits or taking grants but not providing necessary help to home-grown test kit initiatives.

None from the DGDA was present at the Gonoshasthaya Kendra's handover ceremony to collect kits, it said, adding: "This shows government's disinterest nakedly."

Moreover, a section of the media are harassing Zafrullah publicly and trying to start a campaign to make the Gonoshasthaya Kendra's test kit questionable, the statement added.

Among others Dhaka University professor emeritus Serajul Islam Choudhury, Central Women's University Vice Chancellor Prof Perween Hasan, former DU professors Akmal Hossain and Ahmed Kamal, Jahangirnagar University professor Anu Muhammad, professor Naila Zaman Khan, photographer Shahidul Alam, professor Meghna Gulathakurta, professor Gitiara Nasreen, anthropologist and columnist Rahnuna Ahmed and journalist Golam Mortoza signed the statement.