

Shutdown likely to stretch

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according to the Directorate General of Health Services.

The health ministry is going to have two important meetings today and tomorrow -- one with mostly factory owners and another with health experts, an official said.

The shutdown that started on March 26 was extended until May 5 earlier. All essential services and vehicles carrying goods are out of its purview.

The government on April 23 while extending the closure till May 5, said factories, including pharmaceuticals and export-oriented manufacturing units, could reopen by ensuring the workers' safety.

Health experts, however, say reopening the factories increases the risk of a wider transmission.

Asked why the government wants to extend the closure further, Farhad Hossain said, "We don't want the spread of coronavirus among a large number of people by relaxing the shutdown... People are getting infected in a growing number in recent days. We think extending the shutdown will help us to contain the spread."

As of yesterday, 2,592 out of 7,602 export-oriented garments and other factories reopened, according to Industrial Police.

This resulted in an influx of workers to the industrial areas in Dhaka and elsewhere. This has been

happening although Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan on Tuesday said no one would be allowed to enter the capital for work.

TWO MEETINGS

An inter-ministerial meeting is scheduled to be held at the Health and Family Welfare Ministry today, which is expected to be attended by representatives of home, commerce, labour and employment, and industries ministries, and police.

Representatives of business associations, FBCCI, BGMEA, BKMEA, and BTMA, will also attend the meeting where the issue of reopening factories on a limited scale will be discussed, according to the invitation letter for the meeting.

"It's actually a meeting with the industry people," Habibur Rahman Khan, additional secretary at the Health and Family Welfare Ministry, said.

He said the government allowed limited operation of factories "considering the reality" and the meeting would be held to discuss the impact of the decision and what further measures can be taken to ensure health safety.

Besides, a meeting of the national technical advisory committee formed last month to tackle the outbreak would be held tomorrow, he said.

Health issues would be discussed there, Habibur told The Daily Star yesterday.



Policemen who tested positive for the coronavirus waiting in a vehicle in front of Airport Police Station in the capital yesterday to be taken to isolation facilities. Inset, law enforcers arrive in protective gear at Central Police Hospital to get tested for coronavirus. The photos were taken yesterday.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

You die, we live!

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Orders worth \$3.15 billion (of 1,153 factories) have already been cancelled, said Rubana Huq, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA). "It will directly impact the lives of 2.2 million workers, not to mention their families."

Shipped in January and early February, nearly \$18million goods of the Winners Creations Ltd are still lying at ports of North America. "All I've been doing is to ask buyers repeatedly to accept the goods and clear payments," said Winners' managing director, Durjoy Rahman.

Mostafiz Uddin, managing director of Chattogram-based the Denim Expert Limited, told The Daily Star that his buyers have already sent letter to consider payment being deferred by 180 days. "It's neither acceptable nor sustainable."

Truly, it's absolutely unfair the way apparel business is being run over decades. Here buyers and importers set the rules of the game, in which liabilities are solely on shoulders of garment-makers.

With a clause of deferred payment in letter of credit (L/C) -- the formal loan agreement for a purchase -- they are literally fleeing the Bangladesh garment sector and raking in fortunes without investing a single penny for production of goods. With such L/Cs, these global traders let goods be made with money of makers, get those shipped out and release payments to manufacturers after months of delay.

This means they buy their products on credit and pay manufacturers only after selling those. And in case of poor sale, buyers invariably would ask for discounts and manufacturers oblige. Discount keeps the business going, after all.

In line with the legacy, buyers are now laying down the rules of business

on their own. The scale of damage that coronavirus has caused to the global \$758 billion apparel market a year is yet to be ascertained. But, if not the \$5 billion export proceeds are released by the buyers anytime soon, most of garment-makers in Bangladesh would find themselves on verge of bankruptcy, fear exporters.

About 80 percent of 5,000 factories in Bangladesh supply the cheap clothes to the world market, and buyers offer the same price they used to give 20 years back for many items including T-shirts. Factories in this bracket are barely surviving and set to be hit hard with this corona-squeeze. Buyers kept on hold \$1 lakh payment of Century Design & Fashions Ltd. And its managing director, Azharul Haque, does not know to how to pay the bills.

The next three months is the peak time for sweater industries. Owner of Crown Fashions and Crown Exclusives, Rezaul Ahsan, has invested almost 60pc of the \$15 million order on procurement of raw materials and accessories. And the whole investment of country's leading sweater exporter is now at stake. "I'm living on my nerves, constantly," he said.

Garment-makers kicked up an uproar when they hurried on to cut short the lockdown period and open factories against this grim backdrop. "Why is this desperation" is the commonly asked question.

"We're open!" Possibly, a desperate message exporters want to send out to their buyers.

"Garment manufacturers are in fear of their apparel-rivals in Vietnam that has recovered fast from the pandemic and is open for business," observed development economist, Prof. Rashid Al Mahmud Titumir. "They don't want to lose out to Vietnam whatever work orders they are left with."

The government has announced a \$589 million soft loan for the largest

forex-earning sector. But this bailout package alone is not enough for the beleaguered sector. Monthly salary of about 3.6 million workers in this industry stands at \$423 million, BGMEA president pointed out.

Rashed, a teacher at Dhaka University and chairman of the development think-tank Unnayan Onneshan, thinks this sector requires a sustainable bailout formula to survive in the post-pandemic world. All the stakeholders-- the manufacturers, buyers, governments, labour unions and organisations like Accord-Alliance-- should sit together and find out a long-term formula like the way they did after Rana Plaza tragedy in 2013 to scale up compliance standard in factories.

A huge social and economic disaster is waiting to happen if it's not done, he warned.

The sector is in dire straits for sure, but it has a very negative image as well, for which it's more often than not misunderstood and deprived of the public and private support it needs. As public perception goes, garment-makers are worker-unfriendly, low-paying, and lying-for-profit greed merchants.

The image is not fully a figment of imagination. But, truly, the sector has come a long way, going through some serious reforms since 2013. And, now is the time when these industries require serious help, more strategic than financial.

With a long-term bailout formula, garment sector would recover to remain as the county's robust growth-driver. And, with a short-term unplanned assistance, it's destined to become an industry on saline for good.

Would garments sector get medicine for recovery? Onus is on the government. (Senior business reporter Refayet Ullah Mirdha contributed to this report with additional information)

Journos provide

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The press provides the antidote: verified, scientific, fact-based news and analysis," the UN secretary-general said.

Meanwhile, Transparency International Bangladesh has called upon the government to ensure an environment conducive to free and unrestricted discharge of professional functions of media as an indispensable precondition for constitutional rights of citizens and democratic accountability of the government.

In the context of the Covid-19 crisis, the TIB has demanded the government and other stakeholders protect professional freedom and health safety of media workers in the interest of people's access to information and public awareness.

In a statement issued yesterday on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day 2020, the graft watchdog expressed concern over media workers reporting on corruption, theft, extortion and swindling of relief goods being subjected to self-censorship by various predicaments, harassment, intimidation, physical abuse, torture, disappearance and arbitrary arrests under motivated use of the Digital Security Act.

TIB Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman said, "The World Press Freedom Day this year is of much greater importance than ever. Free media is the most important catalyst to control illicit designs of those who are out to convert the Covid-19 pandemic into a festival of corruption."

"Media must be free to report not only on corruption and irregularities in relief operation on the ground, but also on different types of abuse of power and collusive corruption at higher levels where the need to fast-track procurement and distribution decisions in the crisis and recovery period may be treated as a licence for self-enrichment by a section of the politically and otherwise powerful."

"In this context it will be self-defeating to create any predicament against the media from discharging their professional role of information disclosure freely and safely," the TIB executive director said.

US HIGHLIGHTS FREE EXPRESSION
The USA has joined countries around the world, including Bangladesh, to reaffirm the universal right of free expression and the essential role press

freedom plays in protecting democracy and keeping citizens informed and safe, reports UNB.

"The work of journalists, photojournalists, and media outlets often comes with sacrifice, including here in Bangladesh," said US Ambassador to Bangladesh Earl Miller in a statement yesterday marking the World Press Freedom Day.

"This year, we pay special tribute to those journalists who work tirelessly, often under stressful and dangerous conditions, to inform the public about the Covid-19 pandemic."

The envoy said they honour the journalists who have fallen ill from Covid-19 and their selfless dedication to public service.

"We honor the life of Humayan Kabir Khokon, a senior journalist who worked until the day of his death and posthumously tested positive for the virus. We send our sincere condolences to Khokon's family," he said.

Ambassador Miller said they honour all journalists, everywhere, who have sacrificed their lives, freedom and personal wellbeing in pursuit of truth and justice.

'END CRIMINALISATION OF JOURNALISM'

The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression, David Kaye, has urged states to free all media workers detained because of their work and stop the intimidation and repression of the independent press.

"A free press gives people access to information of all kinds, especially critical during a public health crisis," he said in a statement on Friday marking World Press Freedom Day today.

Kaye said the theme of this year's World Press Freedom Day is "Journalism without fear or favour".

He urged all states to ensure that media workers can do their jobs without fear, keeping in mind that journalism expands people's right to know and their right to accountable government.

He said detaining journalists runs directly counter to the state's obligation to ensure an enabling environment for the media.

"At a time when disease outbreaks spread through detention facilities, detention's cruelty is exposed, imposing an additionally excessive punishment that carries with it the risk of illness and death," said Kaye.

Pvt univs ask

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taking tuition fees from students.

Association of Private Universities of Bangladesh (APUB) sent a letter to the University Grants Commission (UGC) in this regard on Wednesday.

The association promised to repay the aid in instalments over three years when the situation stabilises.

"We are hoping positive response from the UGC as many universities are facing existential threat," said Sheikh Kabir Hossain, chairman of APUB.

"We did not mention exact amount of incentive as we are still estimating it," he said.

All the educational institutions have been closed since March 17 and the government has extended the closure till May 5 to stem the further spread of Covid-19.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on April 27 said all educational institutions would remain closed until September if the coronavirus situation does not improve.

Fund crisis in the universities deepened further as they have halted their admission process -- another major source of income -- in line with the UGC directives, the letter said, adding that the newly set up universities would suffer the most.

According to the latest UGC annual report 2018, there are some 3,62,000 students at 105 private universities across the country.

"We have received the letter ... We will forward the letter to the Ministry of Education soon," UGC Chairman Prof Kazi Shahidullah told The Daily

Star.

The issue was discussed at a meeting attended by Education Minister Dipu Moni, UGC top officials, vice-chancellors of several public and private universities and leaders of APUB on Thursday, he said.

The minister said she would look into the matter after receiving the letter, said the UGC chair.

UGC acting secretary Ferdous Zaman said the meeting also decided that the private universities would not pressure the students or their guardians for the tuition fees during the ongoing crisis.

It also decided that the authorities would not lay off their teachers and staff and their salaries would be paid regularly, he added.

ONLINE EXAMS FOLLOWING UGC GUIDELINES

At the meeting, the education ministry and the UGC have asked all private and public universities to complete academic activities for the current semester through online classes.

However, private universities will have to hold exams in line with the commission's guideline in that score, which is in the making.

"At the meeting, we decided that all public and private universities must ensure that the classes be held online," Ferdous said.

UGC sources said that only 63 universities out of the 151 are conducting online classes. Of them, only two to three are public universities, and the rest are private.

Detect, isolate

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Health Services (DGHS) reported that 552 new cases were detected and five more people died in 24 hours since 2:30pm yesterday.

With it, the total number of detected Covid-19 cases stood at 8,790 while the death toll hit 175.

Like other days, Prof Nasima Sultana, additional director general (administration) at the DGHS, informed about the country's latest Covid-19 situation in a bulletin through videoconferencing.

She said three more patients receiving treatment at hospitals recovered in those 24 hours, taking the total number of reported recovery cases to 177.

Among the five deceased, three were males and two were females. All of them were from Dhaka.

One of the deceased was over 60 years, one between 51 and 60, two were between 41 and 50 and one was between 31 and 40, said Prof Nasima.

The authorities had reported the first three Covid-19 cases in the country on March 8 and the first death on March 18.

Of all the 175 deceased, 73 percent were males, shows IEDCR data.

Some 42 percent of all the deceased were above 60, some 27 percent were aged between 51 and 60, some 19 percent between 41 and 50, some seven percent between 31 and 40. The rest were below 30.

No death has so far been reported from the age group 11-20, shows the data.

Dhaka city continues to remain the worst-affected region in terms of the number of cases and deaths caused by the deadly virus.

As of yesterday, a total of 4,309 cases -- 56.02 percent of all cases -- were detected in Dhaka city alone, according to the IEDCR website.

More than 83 percent of the total cases were from Dhaka division, it showed.

As many as 95 Covid-19 patients who died in hospitals were from the capital, seemingly the epicenter of the outbreak in Bangladesh.

During the last three days, the city

saw more than 200 new cases daily -- a continuous upward trend compared to other regions.

Among other regions, Narayanganj saw the highest cases -- 987 -- followed by Gazipur with 322 confirmed cases.

Out of 342 confirmed cases in Chattogram division, highest 104 cases were detected in Cumilla district, proved to be another epicenter outside Dhaka division.

Mymensingh saw 269 cases as of yesterday while 149 cases were detected in Rangpur division, 147 cases in Khulna, 135 in Sylhet, 123 in Barishal and 112 in Rajshahi.

A total of 5,827 individuals' samples were tested in 24 hours since 2:30pm yesterday, which is 4.56 percent more than the previous day, Dr Nasima said.

One hundred and sixty eight people were put under isolation across the country over the period, she added.

'CASE DETECTION, ISOLATION CRUCIAL'

Recently, thousands of readymade garment workers have returned to work from their village home after the government allowed to operate RMG factories with certain conditions.

Sources, however, said the decision was finalised without fixing any health protocol in coordination with the DGHS.

"Maintaining social distancing is the key to contain the transmission. Now the situation will depend on how we are maintaining it," Prof Nasima told The Daily Star, while replying to a query on the issue.

Asked whether the reopening decision was taken in consultation with the DGHS, she said, "You better ask it our high-ups."

Source said the government office concerned and the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association had sought suggestions from the DGHS and the IEDCR in this regard.

Later, the DGHS asked to ensure social distancing in the living places of the garment workers, while the IEDCR suggested keeping the workers in 14 days of quarantine before they would join work.

"There was a recommendation that

A step forward for Ganashyasta test kit validation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University has formed a committee that will supervise the validation of the home-grown rapid test kit developed by Gonoshasthaya Kendra.

"We had a meeting with the scientists of Gonoshasthaya Kendra. We have formed a six-member committee. They will prepare a protocol based on the discussions with Gonoshasthaya," said BSMMU Vice-Chancellor Prof Kanak Kanti Barua.

Once the committee finalises the protocol, it will have to be approved by the BSMMU Institutional Review Board before the validation of the kit -- Rapid Dot Blot -- begins, he told The Daily Star. The committee will decide on the sample size of those who will be tested, the VC added.

Stimulus all

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Every bank has to sign participation agreements with the BB to get funds under the schemes. Some cash-strapped lenders have already done it, they mentioned.

They also said the banks would start disbursing loans to export-oriented industries this week for paying workers' wages for April as the BB already gave the lenders Tk 2,000 crore from a Tk 5,000 crore stimulus package.

M Kamal Hossain, managing director of the Southeast Bank, said both the central bank and the finance ministry have taken prompt measures to implement the stimulus packages.

"We have already signed a participation agreement to get funds from one of the refinancing schemes. The other agreements will be signed soon," he mentioned.

Syed Mahbubur Rahman, managing director of Mutual Trust Bank, said banks may start using the soft funds from the central bank by this month as many of them have acted promptly and submitted applications to the BB.

Seeking anonymity, a BB official said 41 banks have so far signed participation agreements with the central bank under the refinancing scheme worth Tk 5,000 crore for small and medium entrepreneurs in the farm sector.

"We hope banks will start giving loans within a week or two, as the central bank will disburse the required funds in the quickest possible time," added the official.

Banks will get funds under the scheme at 1 percent interest rate, and lend those to borrowers in the farm sector at 4 percent interest rate.

Under the Tk 30,000 crore package for large industries and the service sector, Sonali Bank, the country's biggest lender in terms of loan disbursement and deposit mobilisation, has already sanctioned loans of Tk 1,000 crore to Biman Bangladesh Airlines at 9 percent interest rate.

The state-run bank will get an interest subsidy of 4.50 percent from the BB for the loans.

Under 11 other stimulus packages, the government will provide Tk 17,866 crore in the form of budgetary support to the underprivileged people, farmers and the government employees infected with the coronavirus.

Farmers will be provided with fertilisers, machinery, fuel and electricity at subsidised prices under one of the packages involving Tk 9,500 crore.

The government will also give Tk 2,000 as cash support to each of the 50 lakh urban families hit hard by the nationwide shutdown.

Those engaged in the informal labour sector -- mostly manual labourers, mechanics, construction workers, rickshaw-pullers, street vendors and restaurant employees -- will be eligible for the cash support, said Shah Kamal, senior secretary at the disaster management and relief ministry.

"Our ministry has prepared a list of such people based on information collected by the offices of the deputy commissioners, upazila nirbahi officers and city corporations across the country. We will submit the list to the Prime Minister's Office on May 4."

The government also has a plan to provide food assistance to 1.25 crore families under various programmes, Kamal said.

The public employees, infected with the virus, will get Tk 5 to Tk 10 lakh based on their pay scales.

Experts say the BB has to be proactive in implementing the stimulus packages as the central bank of a country plays a pivotal role in containing the economic fallout during a recession.

Talking to The Daily Star, Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute, said the BB will have to take prompt measures to implement the refinancing schemes which will give a lifeline to the moribund economy.

The BB should share the credit risk and offer the lenders a loan guarantee scheme to encourage them to disburse loans, he said.

Otherwise, many banks will be reluctant to disburse loans out of fear that the loans will become defaulted given the poor economic outlook, Ahsan pointed out.

He further said the government should come up with a package ranging from Tk 25,000-Tk 30,000 crore to provide cash support to the marginal people. It will help boost their capacity to purchase goods.

"This will also help create demands for products and offset the ongoing deflationary trend at the same time."

Many countries such as the US, Chile, Malaysia and Singapore have already injected a large amount of the money into their economies, he added.