

Amphan slams into the coast

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The country never saw evacuation of this scale during any natural disaster, mentioned Enamur.

“The districts near the Sundarbans -- Satkhira, Bagerhat and Khulna -- could be affected badly by the cyclone,” the minister added.

Amphan, formed in the Bay of Bengal on Saturday, turned into a super cyclone within just 18 hours on Monday. But it gradually weakened and became an extremely severe cyclone.

Yet, it made landfall with a wind speed of 160 kmph and caused tidal surges up to nine feet in some coastal areas. Hundreds of villages were inundated in Bhola, Patuakhali, Barguna, Khulna, Bagerhat and Satkhira. And tidal surges battered the char areas in Barguna, Patuakhali, Bhola, Barishal and Laxmipur.

Almost all the coastal districts experienced rain and strong wind since early yesterday due to the influence of Amphan. It started raining heavily in the evening, reported our correspondents from different districts.

Dhaka and its adjacent districts also experienced gusty wind and rain since yesterday afternoon.

Many low-lying areas of Barishal, Chattogram and Khulna went under water due to tidal surges. In some areas, onrushing water breached protection embankments.

Barishal Divisional Commissioner Mohammad Yamin Chowdhury said scores of low-lying areas in the district went under three to four-foot-deep water.

The areas include Dhal Char, Char Nijam and Char Kalatali of Bhola; several villages of Rangabali and Galachipa upazilas of Patuakhali; and Majhir Char of Pirojpur.

The Meghna, Bhola, Baleshwar, Bishkhali and Paira rivers were flowing above the danger mark at several points in Patuakhali, Barguna and Bagerhat, said Water Development Board officials.

“Some areas in Rangabali and Galachipa upazilas got flooded due to overflow of rivers,” said Md Hasanuzzaman, executive engineer at the WDB Patuakhali Circle.

Different areas in Dacope and Koira upazilas of Khulna were also flooded as Rupsha, Shibshar and Pashur rivers were flowing above the danger level.

Onrushing water overflowed the protection embankment in Dakkhin Betkashi of Koira, said locals many of whom were seen putting sandbags on the embankment.

“We don’t think it will work,” said Harendranath Sarkar, Ward-9 member of Koira Sadar union.

Our correspondents in Khulna and Barishal divisions reported that people in the districts were experiencing

power cuts and disruption of mobile network since yesterday evening.

THE DEATHS
Shah Alam, the leader of a team of Red Crescent volunteers, drowned as a boat capsized in a canal in Patuakhali’s Kalapara upazila yesterday morning.

The body of the 40-year-old man was found around 6:00pm, said Asaduzzaman, assistant director of Kalapara Cyclone Preparedness Programme.

In the same district, a five-year-old boy was killed as a tree branch fell on him while he was on his way to a cyclone centre.

The victim was identified as Rashed, son of Shah Alam from Galachipa upazila, said Upazila Nirbahi Officer Shah Md Rafiqul Islam.

In Bhola, an elderly man was killed in a similar way in Charfashion in the afternoon.

A tree fell on Siddikur Rahman, 70, as he stepped out of his house. He died on the spot, said Mohammed Masud Alam Siddique, deputy commissioner of Bhola.

Besides, 50-year-old Shajahan Molla, a farmer from Pirojpur, was killed in a mudslide during the cyclone. Another elderly person died on the way to a cyclone shelter in Barguna early yesterday.

NO ELECTRICITY
Nearly 50 lakh subscribers of Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board (BREB) in a dozen districts were left without electricity due to the cyclone, said BERB officials.

The districts include Khulna, Bagerhat, Satkhira, Barishal, Patuakhali, Pirojpur, Laxmipur, Jashore, Barguna and Noakhali.

Many of the subscribers had no electricity since yesterday evening, BREB Chairman Major General Moin Uddin (Retd) told The Daily Star around 9:30pm.

Moreover, around three lakh customers of West Zone Power Distribution Company in Barishal Division were left without electricity, said its Executive Engineer Amullo Kumar Sarkar.

CTG, MONGLA PORTS
Great danger signal 9 was hoisted at the Chattogram port due to Amphan, said Md Omar Faruk, secretary at Chattogram Port Authority.

Loading and unloading of goods at jetties as well as lighterage of goods from big vessels at the outer anchorage had been suspended since Monday evening. Delivery of goods was also suspended yesterday evening.

All 19 vessels from the berths and more than 50 vessels from the outer anchorage were sent to the deep sea by yesterday noon, said the port secretary.

At the Mongla port, 11 foreign ships were moved to safe locations away from the port, said Harbormaster Sheikh Fakhruddin.

Sundarbans the bulwark

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The uprooted trees and destroyed houses on the edge of the forest were reminiscent of the devastation wrought on the area by the cyclone of 1988, sources said.

The forest eventually recovered from the wounds made by cyclones and became green again within a couple of years. The weakened Cyclone Bulbul, which hit last year, did not cause as much damage to the Sundarbans as Sidr and Aila did.

Khasru Chowdhury, who has been visiting the Sundarbans for the last 40 years and working to save tigers, said the forest is acting like a shock absorber.

When asked about the role of the Sundarbans, Dr Reza Khan, eminent wildlife and forest ecology expert, told The Daily Star that the Sundarbans has been saving the country from cyclones as it is working as a wall.

“If the Sundarbans were not there, the entire Khulna Division would be like a desert without any tree or human habitation, because the cyclone would bring salty sea water and destroy all vegetation,” said Dr Reza Khan, adding that what the Sundarbans is doing for the country

would be impossible to determine in financial terms.

Dr Reza urged the government to stop all kind of economic and commercial interventions in and around the Sundarbans immediately.

“The only intervention the government should continue there is to save the forest,” he said.

Sharif Jamil, secretary of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon, who has been protesting against establishment of coal-fired power plants for a few years, said the Sundarbans has once more proved to be more important than any economic activity in the backdrop of the government’s unwillingness to abandon destructive industrial activities in Rampal, Mongla, Taltili and Kalapara.

When extreme weather comes from the sea, it eclipses even the danger of pandemics like the ongoing Covid-19 as people scamper to take shelter from nature’s unbridled fury. Jamil said it was very frustrating to see the people’s top priority is the last priority of the government in their development plans.

Bangladesh and India jointly share the unique mangrove forest, with 6,017sqkm in Bangladesh.

Govt always responds

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cyclone,” the PM said.

Hasina joined the meeting from the Gono Bhaban through videoconferencing. She sought blessings of Almighty Allah so that people’s lives and properties were not affected by the cyclone.

PM’s Press Secretary Ihsanul Karim briefed the media after the meeting.

The premier expressed satisfaction at the overall preparations and thanked all concerned, including the disaster management and relief ministry, armed forces, police and local people involved in the process.

“Twenty lakh people have so far been evacuated to cyclone centres as part of advance preparations. As many as 13,241 cyclone shelter centres have already been opened to this end,” she added.

Hasina recalled that the then BNP government took no steps when the deadly 1991 cyclone hit the country’s south-eastern coastlines.

“Even they didn’t care for the information about the disaster for which thousands of people were killed and air force planes, navy ships and other public properties got damaged in the cyclone.”

The PM said then opposition Awami League leaders and activists reached reliefs to the cyclone affected people, before the government did.

She said disaster-related advance information is now being collected through satellite and agreements have been signed internationally to take prompt measures to disseminate information to the grassroots level to get prepared in advance to face any disaster.

Hasina said the people of Bangladesh would have to live facing various natural disasters due to its geographical location. “So, Bangladesh will always have to be ready to face any kind of man-made or natural disasters.”

She said her government has achieved a great success in reducing risks and losses of lives and properties caused by various disasters like cyclone, which has gained international recognition.

Ministers concerned, the cabinet secretary and chiefs of the three services joined the meeting from the Secretariat in the capital through videoconferencing. The state minister for disaster management and relief took part in it from the Gono Bhaban.



Policemen charge truncheons on women garment workers who blocked the Dhaka-Mawa highway demanding arrears. *Inset*, police also fired tear gas canisters to open the road to traffic after the workers, who claim to be of Civic Apparels Ltd, kept the road blocked for several hours in Postogola area of the capital yesterday morning. Related story on page 12.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN



Rapid, low-cost kit awaits nod

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almost all the tests. That may not be 100 percent correct but close to that mark. When we conducted the trial, we got 100 percent correct results. Let me give you an example for a better understanding (for both tests). Last Sunday, a doctor’s family -- father, mother and son -- contacted us. All were tested positive for Covid-19 RT-PCR tests on May 12. We tested their samples with our kits and found the son developed antibodies, and the father developed antibodies so insignificant that it is hardly traceable. The mother has not developed antibodies. But both the mother and the father have developed antigen. Had we conducted only antibody tests we could have found one Covid-19 positive case. But by doing both the antibody and antigen tests we could identify three positive cases. And this is the specialty of our kits. We believe it is a complete kit capable of conducting Covid-19 tests in just five minutes. We are excited to present the kits to the nation and the whole world. If you ask me, it will be our biggest satisfaction.

TDS: Is it taking a bit longer than expected?

BKS: There are certain things that you cannot control. We are the first in the world to announce that we have developed Covid-19 detection kits. The United States and Europe followed suit. Senegal and other countries started the development after us but have already produced kits for public use. However, Senegal is conducting only antibody tests. A company in the United States has produced a kit capable of both antibody and antigen tests like ours and they have got the approval from the FDA last week. We have announced it first, but the others are already in the market and we are not.

TDS: People are asking what happened to the Gonoshasthaya-RNA Biotech Limited kits.

BKS: We had an opportunity or possibility to present our kit to the world first. Anyway, it’s now in BSMMU under trial. They need to follow a certain process and they also have their limitations. We have submitted 200 antibody kits and as many antigen kits. They have got space constraints and that’s why they are not taking the whole samples. We

are hopefully getting their report next week.

TDS: Tell us about your joining at Gono University and your involvement with the development of the kits.

BKS: When I joined Gono University in February this year, the coronavirus has already spread in China where it has originated. But the whole world was yet to take it seriously. Since I have previously worked during the SARS outbreak, which is 82 percent similar to Covid-19, I told Zafrullah sir (Zafrullah Chowdhury) that these types of viruses are lethal and that I want to develop testing kits for Covid-19. He endorsed the idea immediately and we started our work.

TDS: The world did not take Covid-19 seriously in February. What were your thoughts at that time?

BKS: When the coronavirus was detected in China in December last year, I think it was an ideal time for the virus to spread. It was the time for the Chinese New Year when around 20 to 25 crore Chinese people travel from one place to another. I was suspecting that the virus would spread like wildfire across the world thanks to the introduction of budget airlines and make no mistake there is not a single country in the world where you will not find a Chinese citizen.

I can also remember attending a meeting of Bangladesh Medical Research Council on February 18 when I warned everyone in attendance that if we take coronavirus lightly, we will make a big mistake. I have also requested to lay out an emergency plan so that we can prevent it.

The fact is that the whole world took it lightly. Even the United States and Europe failed to understand how quickly the virus can spread. Perhaps everyone thought this virus could be contained like the SARS virus in 2003. I could understand the gravity because of my prior experience with the SARS in Singapore.

TDS: Test and more tests are very important. Aren’t we lagging behind in that aspect?

BKS: There are many things that I don’t want to talk about. BSMMU is running trials of our kits. We are also continuing with our research and trying to improve every day. We are expecting to get the approval of the

kits next week. These kinds of kits are very important for us now. Many people might have been infected but they can’t be confirmed without a test. If our kits get approval it will take only five minutes to identify.

TDS: If approved where and how do you want to conduct tests? Do you need a lab for that or it could be done without a lab?

BKS: We are working on it. What I can say is that it is very simple to test with our kits. Anybody can do the testing and a lab is not necessary. However, there is a certain element of risk for testing without a lab because if the test is not done carefully the person who is conducting the test might run the risk of being infected. That’s why we are thinking of doing tests in labs. We can test samples outside a lab at a later stage. That’s what we have planned at the moment.

TDS: Is testing samples in the lab an impediment for massive testing?

TDS: Not necessarily. A PCR testing takes two days to get results. For a lab to test 500 samples through a PCR machine, it takes 10 days. But with our kits, you can get 500 samples or more tested in a day.

TDS: You have already become popular as a research scientist. With people grappling with coronavirus pandemic, what is your advice for mass people?

BKS: Coronavirus pandemic has infected Bangladesh like the other countries in the world. We will have to face it. We should not panic and avoid thinking that we might die if we get infected. The infection trend in Bangladesh so far indicates that the damaging capability of Covid-19 here is weak. If you don’t get nervous or panic after being infected, the virus will not cause you much harm. If you feel bad, run temperature or cough, drink raw tea with spice. Besides, vitamin C is most effective to protect ourselves from coronavirus. I would suggest everyone to take 500mg vitamin C every day, half in the morning and the other half at night. We must also use masks while going out.

I’m quite surprised that WHO is focusing more on coughing and sneezing. They are not talking about spitting which is a more serious vector of Covid-19 than coughing and sneezing.

Objects hidden

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The items were likely hidden in the chimney because block 17 was used to house manual workers.

“It is no coincidence that a chimney was used as a hiding place in the very building where chimney sweeps were accommodated,” the fund’s structural consultant Johannes Hofmeister said, according to a press release from the fund.

The objects are not expected to be on display at the exhibition, due to open in 2021, but instead have been handed over to the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum for conservation.

One million European Jews died at Auschwitz-Birkenau, which Nazi Germany set up in occupied Poland in 1940 and which became Europe’s biggest death camp.

More than 100,000 others including non-Jewish Poles, Roma, Soviet prisoners of war and anti-Nazi resistance fighters also died there.

Items scattered around the camp and its surroundings continue to turn up periodically during works.

Pandemic bites

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And like US counterpart Donald Trump he has also promoted the use of anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine against the virus despite studies showing it has no benefit. Brazil’s health ministry yesterday recommended using chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine to treat even mild and moderate cases of Covid-19.

CLASHES IN CHILE
Chile is also suffering from a sharp rise in cases and on Tuesday deployed soldiers on the outskirts of its locked-down capital Santiago after clashes with protesters angry about food shortages and job losses.

“People don’t have work, they don’t have money and they don’t have food,” said Monica Sepulveda, a 46-year-old unemployed security guard from El Bosque, a working class neighbourhood where residents armed with clubs and stones clashed with riot police.

Faster increase

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AMPHAN CONCERN
Expressing fear that the risk of infection will rise among the people taking shelter at the cyclone centres, Rezaul Karim Chowdhury, executive director of COAST Trust, told this correspondent that the government should not move all the people from the coastal areas at the same time.

The local administration should move only the people from high-risk areas and evacuate them 10 hours before the cyclone hits, he said, adding that this would reduce exposure to the virus.

“Early transfer means they will have to provide food to these people. Naturally, during the distribution, social distancing regulations will be violated,” he added.

Mohammed Masud Alam Siddique, deputy commissioner of Bhola, said they have so far moved 3.5 lakh people to about 1,104 cyclone centres.

He said they are requesting people at the cyclone centres to maintain distance, wear masks and wash hands regularly.

“It’s difficult to manage such a huge number of people Officials working at the centres are also run the risk of contracting the virus.”

Speaking to this correspondent over the phone, Dr Nasima said, “Like the people on the ferries, the people at the shelters have similar risks of getting infected.”

Recently, a huge number of people thronged ferries to leave Dhaka.

Asked whether testing would be hampered in the coastal districts due to the cyclone, she replied, “It’s obvious. But two or three days’ delay will not be a big deal.”

Prof Muzaherul Huq, former Southeast Asia regional director of WHO, on the other hand, said it is essential to detect Covid-19 infected people immediately. “Any delay at all will increase the risk of infection and spread.”

He suggested that the government isolate the infected people and put them in institutional quarantine facilities immediately.

forgive the world!” said Sanid.

There are many others with similar horror experiences.

A health ministry circular last Monday clearly said that all private hospitals and clinics should have separate arrangements for treating suspected Covid-19 patients, and they cannot refuse any patient if they have the particular treatment facilities.

It also said: “No patient can be refused treatment if there are treatment facilities. If the hospitals are to refer the patients to other hospitals, that has to be done only after ensuring arrangement of treatment in consultation with the Covid-19 hospital control room of the health directorate.”

The circular also said the kidney patients suffering for long and undergoing treatment, including dialysis, should be provided with necessary treatment if they are not Covid-19 positive.

Failure to comply with the government order will result in legal action, including revoking of licence, against the hospitals or clinics concerned if allegations are proved, the ministry circular said.

But still the appalling tales abound of ministry guidelines not being honoured.

These have been desperate times

for our healthcare system ever since the coronavirus pandemic hit the country in early March. The government is struggling to do the necessary Covid-19 testing due to limitations of facilities, is trying hard to overcome the shortage of PPE and has taken the praiseworthy decision to appoint additional doctors and nurses to battle the invisible enemy.

But the fight will not muster the necessary momentum unless private hospitals and clinics that treat an overwhelming 70 percent of patients of the country join the cause to overcome a novel menace, the cure for which is yet to be discovered.

It is time to think of humanity above all else.

While it is expected that the private healthcare facilities live up to that moto at a time when Covid-19 infections and deaths in the country are growing with every passing day, non-compliance deserves the toughest of actions from the government.

The onus is on the government to strictly monitor that the guidelines are fully enforced and a violation is dealt with swiftly and harshly.

After all, it is the commitment of the state to guarantee its citizens access to healthcare facilities and see to it that no one is denied of his or her fundamental rights.