

Bus services resume

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Meanwhile, train and launch services resumed yesterday. The number of passengers leaving the capital was lower than that of the Dhaka-bound ones.

Train and launch fares remain unchanged.

Besides, Biman Bangladesh Airlines and two private airlines are set to resume flights on three domestic routes today.

The government had enforced a shutdown of most public and private offices as well as public transport from March 26 to contain the spread of Covid-19.

On May 28, the government announced that all offices would reopen and public transport services would resume on a limited scale on May 31, making it mandatory to follow the health safety guidelines.

NEW BUS FARES

At a meeting on Friday, stakeholders in the road transport sector decided that buses would carry passengers at half capacity when the services resume.

Transport owners demanded that bus fares be doubled.

A committee led by acting chairman of Bangladesh Road Transport Authority Yousub Ali Mollah on Saturday proposed an 80 percent hike in bus fares. The proposal drew huge criticism from various quarters saying this would deal a heavy blow to the already economically affected people.

Yesterday morning, Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader said the government would rationally adjust bus fares, considering people's present financial ability.

"An 80 percent hike [in bus fares] will put an extra burden on people," Quader said while speaking from his residence through video conference with officials of the Road Transport and Highways Division.

Hours later, the ministry issued the circular.

The government last adjusted the inter-district bus fares in May 2016 at Tk 1.42 a kilometre.

With the new hike, it will cost a passenger Tk 700 (excluding tolls) to travel from the capital's Gaborti to Barishal through Faridpur. Before the shutdown, it would cost Tk 438.

Bus fares on routes inside the capital were last adjusted in September 2015 at Tk 1.70 per km.

Now, one has to pay Tk 53 instead of Tk 33 to travel to the Mirpur Zoo from Notre Dame College.

Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity and the Road Safety Foundation demanded that the government scrap the new bus fares.

In a statement, the Samity said the government has fallen into the trap of transport owners, and irrationally increased bus fares by 60 percent which will put an additional burden on people.

Passengers' interest was ignored while making this unilateral decision. This will increase passengers' sufferings and would cause anarchy over fares,

read the statement signed by Samity Secretary General Mozammel Hoque Chowdhury.

Romesh Chandra Ghosh, chairman of Bangladesh Bus-Truck Owners' Association, said he accepted the new fares as the government issued it considering people's financial hardship.

"But many of our owners are unwilling to run buses at this new rate. They want at least 80 percent increase. But I am trying to convince them. We will operate buses from tomorrow," Romesh, also managing director of Shyamoli Paribahan, told this correspondent last night.

Khondaker Enayet Ullah, secretary general of Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association, said, "We have accepted the new fares considering passengers' interest and already started selling tickets."

He urged passengers to help them maintain health safety guidelines.

TRAIN, LAUNCH SERVICES RESUME
Yesterday, eight intercity trains were run on seven routes at half capacity.

Chapainawabganj-bound Banalata Express left the capital around 1:30pm with most of the passengers maintaining physical distancing.

Earlier in the morning, Subarna Express left Chattogram for the capital.

Eleven more intercity trains would resume operation on June 3.

Visiting Kamalapur Railway Station in the afternoon, Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan expressed satisfaction over the safety measures taken by the authorities, and said they did not get any complaint.

Meanwhile, launch services to and from the capital resumed yesterday.

The first launch left Sadarghat terminal for Chandpur around 7:15am, said Alamgir Kabir, joint director of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority at the terminal.

"We have installed disinfectant tunnels, and all passengers have to go through those to enter the terminal. Besides, we are providing hand sanitizer and have also kept many seats empty to ensure social distancing," he mentioned.

Badiuzzaman Badal, senior vice-chairman of Bangladesh Inland Waterways (passenger carriers) Association, said the number of Dhaka-bound passengers was much higher than that of those leaving the capital.

DOMESTIC FIGHTS RESUME

National flag carrier Biman, Novoair and US-Bangla Airlines will operate 24 roundtrip flights a day on three domestic routes from today after over two-month suspension.

Of those, 11 will be run on Dhaka-Chattogram-Dhaka route, nine on Dhaka-Saidpur-Dhaka route and four on Dhaka-Sylhet-Dhaka route.

Biman and Novoair will operate seven flights each a day and US-Bangla Airlines 10 flights, said sources in the airlines.

Commuters'

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"It will not be possible to maintain three feet of distance among passengers in the buses, no matter what rules the government makes," said the employee of a private company.

He cannot afford to go to work on a three-wheeler, he said, adding that he was the only earning member of his family of five.

Public transport will officially resume from today, but buses were seen plying the roads yesterday, and people posted on social media photos and videos of crowded buses in the capital and Chattogram.

Nilima Jahan, a correspondent of this newspaper, said, "We live in Kazipara and my husband works in Uttara. How will he afford Tk 600 for each trip to work?"

"Besides, he works in sales and needs to visit several places for work each day. Now, if he avoids the buses, I cannot even fathom what the daily expenditure

would look like."

A 29-year-old employee of a top-tier pharmaceutical company said she was thinking of quitting her job.

"I went to visit my ancestral home before the shutdown, so I got stuck in another district. Now the office is asking me to go back to Dhaka," she said, requesting anonymity.

"My department is international marketing, but export is closed, meaning work is light. We routinely work from home, because I always coordinate with different time zones and work late."

Her requests for permission to continue working from home were rejected by the management, she added.

Health experts have been saying that lifting the restrictions at a time when the daily new cases are rising would worsen the outbreak. For a large section of the workforce, however, it just means making a choice between unemployment and risking coronavirus infection.

Educational institutions

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institutions, because we want to advance step by step so that students are not infected with coronavirus," she said. "If we can overcome this situation, we'll open the educational institutions gradually," Hasina added.

She was addressing while publishing the results of SSC and equivalent examinations at the Gono Bhaban via video conference. Education Minister Dipu Moni and chairmen of different education boards joined the video conference from the education ministry.

Earlier in the day, Dipu Moni, on behalf of the PM, received the results from the chairmen.

Describing the present situation as a crisis for the whole world, Hasina asked all to be self-confident. "Self-confidence is the biggest thing. Whatever the situation is, we have to face that."

The PM said the country already faced a cyclone amid this coronavirus outbreak.

"We'll face all crises, including cyclone, with confidence, and we'll work together as we're doing right now," she said.

Hasina said the country will be able to overcome the coronavirus pandemic by working together. "That's the goal and that's the decision of the government."

Regarding the relaxing of the shutdown, the PM said everything had been closed for a long time. "Other countries are opening their wheels of economy in phases," she pointed out.

In this connection, Hasina briefly talked about various stimulus packages and food and monetary assistance of the government for the people's welfare.

She said the government in 19 packages allotted some Tk 103,117 crore, which is 3.7 percent of the GDP.

"I do not know any country in the world announced such huge amount (of its GDP) as stimulus packages."

The PM said the government included all poor, destitute, and jobless people under its monetary and food assistance programmes.

"Politics is for the people, and its main aim is to reduce the people's sufferings," she said.

'EDUCATION TOP PRIORITY'

Hasina said the government gives the highest priority to education as it knows that to build a hunger-and-poverty-free Bangladesh, there is no alternative to an educated nation.

"If the light of education does not enter every house of the country, it won't be possible to eliminate poverty from the country," she said.

In this connection, she mentioned that the government has formulated the education policy.

The PM said students of the country are very much brilliant and they can prove themselves if they get chances.

She asked the students to build themselves as the country's worthy citizens imbued with patriotism and humanity, and the government is providing all necessary support in this regard.

Dipu Moni handed over a summary of the results of SSC and equivalent exams to Hasina online from her secretariat office. Deputy Minister for Education Mohibul Hassan Chowdhury was present on the occasion.

PM's Principal Secretary Ahmad Kaikua and PMO Secretary Tofazzal Hossain Mian were present at the Gono Bhaban, while Secretary of Secondary and Higher Secondary Division Mahbub Hossain moderated the results handing ceremony at the education ministry.



People start returning to the capital by train yesterday. Train service resumed after over two months of suspension to slow the spread of coronavirus. The photo was taken at Kamalapur Railway Station.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Curbs loosen, noose tightens

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on "a limited scale" despite fears of an intensified virus onslaught.

Even the government's National Technical Advisory Committee on May 28 suggested the withdrawal of closure in phases, warning that the situation might worsen if safety measures are not strictly implemented.

But their recommendations went unheeded.

Dhaka returned to its usual chaotic self somewhat with traffic jams in different intersections yesterday. A huge number of private cars were seen plying the roads. Long queues were seen in front of banks and post offices in the city.

However, only a handful of shopping malls in different areas had lifted their shutters.

Services on the rail and waterways resumed with overcrowded ferries, raising questions about compliance of health guidelines, deemed very crucial in the fight against novel coronavirus. Buses are scheduled to begin operating from today.

The government first declared the nationwide shutdown from March 26, coinciding with Independence Day, till April 4 after the country on March 18 confirmed the first coronavirus death, 10 days after the detection of the first three Covid-19 cases.

The shutdown was extended in six phases until May 30. Although it was maintained loosely, it halted transport services and closed down most businesses.

The poor and those who rely on day labour to survive were hit hardest. The country's economy, which had already been ailing, was sustaining deep wounds.

Meanwhile, the new-case curve continued to go up.

Against this backdrop, experts fear that lifting the shutdown before strictly enforcing the rules and requirements for slowing the spread will have dire consequences.

Speaking to the Daily Star on Saturday, Dr Iqbal Arsalan, a member of the National Technical Advisory Committee, said the infection index will rise further due to the opening of offices and businesses.

"We do not have enough hospital beds or ventilators to deal with the crisis. Physical distancing is being stressed upon. The law enforcers will try to maintain physical distancing but soon the crowds will get out of control. We have seen this before Eid -- law enforcers tried to disperse crowds but failed because they cannot jump on civilians with riot gear."

He spoke about an impending transport crisis among office-goers, since there has always been a shortage of public transport.

The government formed the 17-member advisory committee to tackle the coronavirus outbreak.

On May 28, when the government declared it would relax closure, the committee in a press release said there would be a severe rise in cases if health and safety measures were not properly enforced.

"It has been seen that countries that lifted the lockdown, before experiencing a definite reduction in the infection rate, saw a rise in the infection," said a statement signed by its Chairperson Prof Dr Md Shahidullah and Member-Secretary Prof Dr Meerjady Sabrina Flora.

"Lifting the lockdown before strictly implementing the rules and requirements of preventing transmission will increase the number

of positive patients and create pressure on the healthcare system," warned the statement.

Prof Shah Monir Hossain, a member of the committee, said, "We had hoped to flatten the curve by the end of June but that is probably not going to happen anymore because the number of coronavirus patients will increase [due to the lifting of the shutdown]."

BRIEFING

In the daily online briefing on the outbreak, Prof Dr Nasima Sultana, additional director general (administration) of the DGHS, said 406 Covid-19 patients have recovered since Saturday, taking the total number of recoveries to 9,781.

Of the dead, 33 were male and seven female, she said, adding that 28 were from Dhaka, eight from Chattogram, two from Khulna, one from Rangpur and another from Rajshahi division.

One was aged between 21 and 30, five between 31 and 40, 11 between 41 and 50, eight between 51 and 60, 11 between 61 and 70, and four between 71 and 80, she said.

A total of 391 people were kept in isolation and 126 were released in the 24 hours till yesterday afternoon, she said.

So far, 5,794 people are in isolation and 3,016 were released across the country, she added.

In the 24 hours till yesterday afternoon, 2,947 people were put in quarantine while 3,042 others were released throughout the country.

Currently, 60,181 people are under home or institutional quarantine, the DGHS official said.

Data shows that the young were most infected with Covid-19. Nearly 72 percent of total infected people are aged between 21 and 50.

attained GPA 5 while 59,185 boys have obtained the highest result.

"Girls doing better in exams is proof that the government efforts in spreading education among women are working out," Dipu Moni said.

Prof Pradip Chakraborty said girls were more attentive in studies than boys. So they are doing well in the public exams.

Educationist and member of the Campaign for Popular Education Rasheda K Choudhury said the government's investment on girls' education is now paying off.

MADRASA, TECHNICAL BOARDS

The technical board saw rises in the success rate but the madrasa board witnessed a slight drop in the pass rate. The number of GPA 5 achievers increased in both streams.

Some 2.77 lakh took Dakhil examinations under the madrasa board and 82.51 percent of them have passed the exam. Last year, the pass rate was 83.03percent. A total of 7,516 students achieved GPA 5 this year as opposed to 6,287 last year.

Under the technical board, 1.32 lakh students took part in the SSC (vocational) and Dakhil (vocational) exams and 72.70 percent of them have passed the exams with 4,885 students scoring GPA 5.

A total of 20,40,028 students -- 10,21,490 boys and 10,18,538 girls -- from 28,796 institutions across the country sat for this year's SSC and its equivalent exams under the 11 boards. Of them, 16,90,529 have passed.

The pass rate was 100 percent in 3,023 institutions while 104 institutions saw zero pass rate.

At least 336 Bangladeshi students sat for the tests in nine foreign exam centres and 318 of them have passed.

Zafrullah for plasma banks in districts

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Gonoshasthaya Kendra Founder and Trustee Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury has called for establishing a plasma bank in every district and lowering prices of medicines being used to treat new coronavirus.

"It is very important to establish a plasma bank in each district now. Plasma therapy seems very effective in saving lives from Covid-19," he said in a statement issued by the Gonoshasthaya Kendra yesterday.

Zafrullah, a kidney patient, tested Covid-19 positive on May 24. He has been staying in isolation at the Gonoshasthaya Nagar Hospital for the last three days. His wife Shireen Huq, a rights activist, and son Barish Chowdhury also tested positive. Shireen was admitted to the same hospital yesterday, while Barish is staying at his house in the city.

Zafrullah has no fever, but has some cough and pain. Shireen has fever and Barish has so far no symptoms, said the statement.

Zafrullah said as new coronavirus infection was increasing, the government should control prices of medicines, whose prices rose during the pandemic. "Otherwise, the poor won't be able to get treatment."

He also called on the government to ensure that the antibody and antigen kit developed by Gonoshasthaya Pharmaceuticals Ltd, a sister concern of Gonoshasthaya Kendra, is approved soon for mass production.

The kit was developed in March this year, but is yet to get the government approval. The Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University is now conducting performance trial of the kit -- Rapid Dot Blot.

Zafrullah repeatedly urged the government to issue emergency authorisation of the kit.

Quick and large-scale tests for Covid-19 are more important now than ever as the offices are opening, said Mohib Ullah Khondoker, coordinator of the Rapid Dot Blot project.

Results will be available within 10 minutes after tests are done by the kit, he said, adding, "Testing and isolation are the best ways. Otherwise, it will be extremely difficult to check the spread of infection in a large number of people."

Industrialist

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Sumit Chakrabarty, senior brand manager of Igloo Ice Cream and Milk Unit of Abdul Monem Ltd, told The Daily Star, "Our chairman sir had been sick for the last few days. On May 17, he suffered a stroke at his residence when he was first admitted to the city's Square Hospital. Later, he was shifted to the CHM."

He left two sons, three daughters and a host of relatives, friends and admirers to mourn his death. He will be buried in his family graveyard in Brahmanbaria, said a press statement of Igloo Ice Cream & Milk Unit.

Abdul Monem was born on January 5 in 1937 in Brahmanbaria. He was a civil engineer by profession. He also played the role of chairman at Mohammedan Sporting Club Limited between 1984 and 1994-95.

He established Abdul Monem Limited in 1956 and successfully ran it along with his two sons -- ASM Mainuddin Monem and ASM Mohiuddin Monem -- working as the deputy managing directors of the company.

Abdul Monem Limited has not only developed a wealth of experience in infrastructure and development project arena, but also became the bottler of Coca Cola, the producer of ice-cream brand Igloo, Igloo milk and dairy products, Igloo food items and snacks, manufacturer of pharmaceuticals, maker of auto bricks, bitumen and other selected construction materials.

The business entity also established AM Sugar Refinery Ltd, AM Rice Bran Oil, ServEngine BPO, AM Securities and Financial Services Ltd, etc.

In 2015, Abdul Monem Limited was awarded for developing one of the first private economic zones of the country -- Abdul Monem Economic Zone (AMEZ) -- in Daudkandi, Munshiganj, according to the Abdul Monem Limited website.

Roads and Bridges Minister and Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader, Prime Minister's Private Industry and Investment Adviser Salman Fazlur Rahman, Law Minister Anisul Huq, State Minister for Shipping Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal President Hasanul Huq Inu and General Secretary Shirin Akhter among others expressed deep shock and condoled the death of Abdul Monem.

Mohammedan Sporting Club Ltd, in a statement, expressed deep shock at his death and prayed for the departed soul and bereaved family members.

Cohorts of abductors, murderers sued

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Faridpur

A case was filed yesterday against four identified and some unidentified people, in connection with the trafficking and murder of 26 Bangladeshi migrant workers in Libya last Thursday.

Razzak Hawladar, father of Jewel Hawladar, one of the victims, filed the case. Jewel left Bangladesh for Libya in January.

Md Anwar Hossain, officer-in-charge (investigation) of Rajoir Police Station said, "Razzak Hawladar filed a case against Julhas Sheikh, Md Zahidul, Md Zakir Hossain, Amir Hossain and some unidentified people around 12:30pm.