

WEEKLY INCREASE IN COVID CASES

Bangladesh now ranks eighth globally: WHO

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh now ranks 8th in terms of global weekly increase in new coronavirus cases, World Health Organization said yesterday.

The country ranked 8th with 26,598 new Covid-19 cases in the last seven days, WHO Dashboard showed in its pandemic situation in countries, territories and areas.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh is 9th as per WHO daily Covid-19 new infection reports among the countries.

The USA has come up to the first position again as 304,156 new cases were reported in the country in seven days, while Latin American country

Brazil ranked 2nd with 260,122 new cases in a week.

South Asian country India ranked third with 131,536 new cases, South Africa fourth with 47,537 and Russian Federation ranked fifth with 47,171 new cases in a week.

The WHO website shows Chile in sixth position with 25,477 new cases in one week while Saudi Arabia seventh with 26,958 new cases in seven days.

Bangladesh reported 3,114 new coronavirus cases and 42 deaths in 24 hours until yesterday morning.

The country's health authorities have so far reported 156,391 Covid-19 cases and 1,968 deaths.

Dental, eye, ENT

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providing only emergency services for the last two to three months and only now they have started to open gradually taking necessary protective measures, he said. But the number of patients is very low, especially those coming from outside Dhaka, he said.

Lions hospital used to give outdoor treatment to more than 250 patients daily before the pandemic, but the number has decreased to around 50.

"We used to carry out 10 to 12 operations daily [six days a week], but now we are doing it once a week," he said.

On the other hand, they would do camp surgeries for 70 to 80 patients a month, which remains suspended now, Shafi Khan said.

As the number of patients came down sharply, the income of the hospital also decreased, he said, adding that they were thus forced to cut the salary of doctors and staffers.

The situation is similar in most of the eye hospitals, he said, adding, "If the pandemic prolongs further, the financial situation of private eye hospitals and chambers of ophthalmologists will face a severe setback."

He said regular patients, especially from outside Dhaka, cannot come to the eye specialists due to the outbreak. And some patients are even avoiding follow-ups, which is harmful for them.

Bangladesh still

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Of them, one was between 11-20 years old, three between 21-30, one between 31-40, five between 41-50, 11 between 51-60, 11 between 61-70, seven between 71-80 and three between 81-90 years old, she said.

Meanwhile, the DGHS is going to put capital's Wari under lockdown from today while Dhaka South City Corporation will implement it.

According to the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), a total of 173 people were infected in this area until June 30.

There are some areas which have higher number of infections but are yet to put under lockdown. For example, Mirpur saw 1,415 cases till June 30 while Uttara and Jatrabari had 716 and 547 cases respectively.

Visiting Wari yesterday morning,

Curtain falls

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industrial belt -- seven in Khulna and two in Jashore -- were shocked to see the closure notices stapled at their mills' main entrances around 9pm on Thursday night.

Although the government decided to shut down 25 state owned jute mills of the country on June 25 laying off some 25,000 workers, the prime minister approved the closure on Thursday. The notices mentioning that the mills will be closed from July 1 were posted soon afterwards.

Ironically, even on July 2 around 10,326 workers worked in the nine state-owned mills of the Khulna region and the jute product produced on that day was 80 metric tons.

"Thousands of workers were still working in the mills at night [Thursday] when the notice was posted. Most did not think that the government could take such a big decision in such a short time, closing all 25 state-mills at once," said Md Mozammel Haque.

The 65-year-old man, who joined Platinum in 1978 as a temporary worker and became permanent in 1988, doubted that workers will receive the golden handshake.

"We did not even receive our Baishakhi allowance or Eid bonus," he said, adding that some workers are nevertheless happy, expecting a large sum of money.

The nine jute mills of the Khulna region employed around 8,100 permanent and 30,000 temporary workers. Only permanent workers will get the golden handshake when the mills are closed.

Boniz Uddin Miah, liaison officer of BJMC of Khulna, told The Daily Star that the mills will remain closed until further notice from the government. In the meantime, a task-force with law enforcement members and BJMC officials will be created to safeguard the mills' properties and assets.

Workers' compensation

Textiles and Jute Minister Golam Dastagir Gazi on Friday said the workers of 25 closed state-run jute mills will receive their wages for the month of June through their personal bank accounts by next week.

He gave this assurance at an urgent press briefing arranged from his

residence at the capital's Siddheshwari.

"Workers will also be paid the wages of 60 days -- July and August," he said.

Fifty percent of all arrears under provident fund, gratuity and golden handshake facilities will directly go to workers' bank accounts and the rest will be paid through savings certificates, the minister said.

All the arrears will be paid under the National Wage Structure, 2015, he added, urging the BJMC to provide the bank account numbers of the workers as soon as possible for payment of the dues.

The minister said workers will get priority when the mills resume operation under the Public-Private Partnership (PPP).

Earlier on Thursday, the prime minister's Principal Secretary Dr Ahmad Kaikaus said Tk 5,000 crore will be required to pay all the arrears.

He also said the 25 mills will be reopened under different types of ventures --PPP, G2G, joint venture or lease model.

LABOUR LEADERS' RESPONSE

Although the workers of the state-owned jute mills in Khulna initially threatened protest against the government's decision, they suspended their programmes on June 30. They said they had not yet received any formal notice about the government's decision.

Sahana Sharmin, president of Platinum Jute Mill Workers' Union, alleged that the government has thwarted their movement.

She urged the government to use the money of the golden handshake for the betterment of jute mills, instead of shutting them down.

Khalilur Rahman Sumon, former workers union president of Khulna Platinum Jute Mill, said the workers did not want the jute mill to be closed permanently.

The closure of state-owned jute mills will also hurt jute farmers. The market will be under the exclusive control of jute traders who will pay a relatively low price for raw jute. Thus farmers will suffer losses and gradually lose interest in jute production.

There are around 72 private jute mills in the country, including 16 in the Khulna region.



Signs put up at a refilling station in the capital's Rajarbagh area say expired cylinders will not be filled and no fuel will be supplied to vehicles without valid fitness certificates. However, none was seen enforcing the directives at the station.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

'Great Wall' for free media falls

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passing of Latifur Rahman on Wednesday, a rare light went out for good.

There are over a dozen businesspersons in Bangladesh who are as renowned as Latifur Rahman, yet not as respected as Latifur Rahman. Why? Successes had never gone to his head and made him arrogant.

He was one of the richest and most influential men in Bangladesh. Yet, it never showed in the way he, with a disarming smile, carried himself around in the businesses he owned, the society he lived in and people with whom he mingled. It was as if he learnt to be more honest with every taka he earned, humbler with every authority he gained, firmer with every crisis he came across and calmer with every tragedy he faced.

Every business is designed to make profits. Those who shine with profit are deemed successful businesspersons. Those who do business ethically are considered respected businesspersons. There are a lot of businesses that are making profits and a few enterprises that are notching happy scores in the yardstick of honesty and ethics. But, Latifur Rahman, the chairman of Transcom Group till his death, went much farther than all others by driving forward close to half a century ethical business initiatives to perform social as well as national responsibilities.

"Employers have a huge responsibility [towards employees], beyond just being an employer," he told about his vision of entrepreneurship while receiving the prestigious Business for Peace Award, 2012 in Oslo. He was a kind of employer who took extra care of his employees and stood by them in times of crisis. A strong sense of responsibility was in his DNA and that set him apart from others in the league of entrepreneurs.

"Invest, empower and then, don't interfere," was the hallmark of his entrepreneurship development. An entrepreneur, in his eyes, takes the

business initiative but a successful entrepreneurship develops only when decision-makers in the organisation -- CEOs, managers and executives -- are fully empowered. "With authority, not only with designation, every decision-maker acts as an entrepreneur," he told a lecture session, organised in his honour, a couple of years back.

Latifur Rahman and his businesses were just an open book. Unlike most of his pals, his personal integrity and business practices were kept under the constant scanner of the powers that be for decades, ever since he invested in the media -- The Daily Star in 1991 and Prothom Alo in 1998, the two daily newspapers that went on to become the most circulated and respected media outlets within a few years.

Quite ridiculously though, there are about 600-plus national dailies, 32-odd TV stations and over 8,000 news portals in Bangladesh, and almost all are owned by businesspeople. As the practice goes, businesspeople strive to have a media house of their own in order to abuse it in the interest of their other businesses. But the media merchants seldom showed the courage and principle of Latifur Rahman, letting the media be free of influence and interference.

Money has power. And media provides them an extra gear to the power in an autocracy, or democracy under threat. The new power, if used in favour of people in power, is a guarantee for a relationship of convenience. Latifur Rahman could easily have been just another one of them. Having been involved with the two most popular media outlets, he should have been one of the most powerful persons in the country. But, like the rarity he was, he chose to be powerless despite being in possession of media power.

He, along with other co-investors, lived up to his principle of entrepreneurship: invest, empower and then don't interfere. That non-interference was practised to such an

extent that a good number of The Daily Star employees do not know yet how many investors are actually on the board, let alone any instance of influencing a news.

With this freedom, the two newspapers emerged as truly independent media, becoming hugely popular among people and equally unpopular among all governments that ruled Bangladesh. Every bold reporting, critical view or commentary drew praise but wrath as well. As independent media, the two newspapers earned the neglect and fury of influential people.

But this freedom came at a huge cost for Latifur Rahman. Although he neither interfered nor played any role in the journalism of the two newspapers, he was seen responsible for it. His businesses were made to suffer, approvals from authorities were delayed or not given and harassment by tax offices increased despite being among the top tax payers for years.

Tremendous pressure from different quarters tested the character of Latifur Rahman. He neither complained nor interfered in journalism by asking the two newspapers to rein back. With every strike, he remained silent, but got firmer in his resolve. Knowingly or unknowingly, he started to act like the Great Wall of China, taking all the external hits on his body, only to keep the media safe. And that Great Wall for free media fell Wednesday.

That is why losing Latifur Rahman is so very colossal a loss for a nation hungry for freedom of expression. Then, he left at a time when he was needed most -- with the coronavirus pandemic turning every business upside down and pushing millions out of jobs.

Sadly, Latifur Rahmans are rarities. When a rarity departs, it rarely returns. Free media is unlikely to get another Latifur Rahman anytime soon. But he leaves behind a legacy to draw strength from and keep going in the struggle for freedom of expression, till some Great Wall appears from nowhere.

Patients handed ghostly bills

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and told them to review the rate. But they did not pay any heed to us," she said.

A 1,360 litre oxygen cylinder can be refilled for around Tk 100, officials at supplier companies Linde and Spectra said.

Covid-19 patients with severe lung infections suffer very low oxygen levels, a refilled cylinder of this size can provide support for about four hours.

But for most patients whose condition is not severe, such cylinders can last for over 10 hours, providing 2 litres of oxygen per minute, said doctors at Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

The Daily Star contacted 10 private hospitals in Dhaka and Chattogram and learnt that they have been charging Tk 200 to Tk 400 per hour for oxygen support.

Before the pandemic, the charges ranged between Tk 100 and Tk 200, according to employees of those hospitals.

Contacted, Managing Director of Max Hospital Dr Liakat Ali Khan, who is a member of Chattogram's Covid-19 Surveillance Team, said, "Due to increased demand and expenses, we now charge Tk 300 per hour for oxygen. If we give it through HFNC, the charge would be Tk 400 per hour."

Asked about Jannatul's case, he said, "It might have been an error by the software."

But her husband Ishaq said, "How can they say it was a mistake? My relatives requested the hospital authorities all day long. Even the MD himself was there."

HOSPITALS BLAME INCREASED COST

Mubin Khan, president of Bangladesh Private Medical College Association, said oxygen bills at private hospitals does not only cover the expenses for oxygen. The hospitals are paying a lot more to doctors and other employees,

and spending on equipment has increased significantly since the outbreak.

"The treatment of Covid-19 patients is not as profitable for private medical hospitals as you think," he said.

Asked for comment, Dr Muzaherul said, "If the claim is true that the expenses of private hospitals got higher due to the coronavirus outbreak, the government should give subsidies, so that the oxygen prices and treatment remain stable."

Prof Dr Rashid-E-Mahbub, chairman of the National Committee on Health Rights Movement and former president of the Bangladesh Medical Association, said the government should have a regulatory mechanism.

He added that it was the government's lack of action that turned some hospitals into "ruthless organisations".

NO SUPERVISION

Mohammad Mizanur Rahman, additional commissioner (development) of Divisional Commissioner's Office in Chattogram, who is the convener of Covid-19 Surveillance Team, said they try to ensure coronavirus treatment at private hospitals, but do not monitor the costs.

Despite almost frequent media reports about patients being handed shockingly high oxygen bills, Aminul Hasan, director (hospitals and clinics) at the Directorate General of Health Services, told The Daily Star he had not heard any such allegations.

MEANWHILE, PEOPLE GET ROBBED

At the capital's Anwer Khan Modern Hospital In May and June, at least three patients' families alleged that they were charged unjustifiably high for oxygen support. After the stories got covered in the media, the management returned a part of the money they took admitting "their mistakes".

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Kuwait House committee lifts immunity of two MPs

They had links with Bangladesh MP Shahid

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Kuwait's Public Prosecution decided to send two Kuwaiti officials to jail, while Parliamentary Legislative Committee has lifted immunity of two MPs for interrogation for their alleged involvement in human trafficking, money laundering and bribery linked to Bangladesh MP Shahid Islam.

Arab Times reported yesterday the Public Prosecution decided to send one official from Kuwait's Manpower Authority and a former candidate of National Assembly for 21 days to the central prison.

Meanwhile, Parliamentary Legislative Committee has decided to lift the immunity of two lawmakers suspected to be involved in the corruption scandal.

The two MPs said they asked the committee to lift their immunity so they could be interrogated by the public prosecution in order to clear their names, denying that they had anything to do with the scandal, reports Kuwait Times.

Last week the Public Prosecutor extended custody of Bangladeshi MP Shahid Islam alias Kazi Papul for an additional 21 days by referring him to the central prison to investigate charges against him.

A well-informed source said that more surprises have cropped up with high profile names in this case as marathon investigations continue to take place with the accused and witnesses.

Shahid Islam, lawmaker from Laxmipur-2 constituency, was arrested by Kuwait CID on June 6 on charges of human trafficking, money laundering, bribery and visa trading.

The managing director and CEO of Marafie Kuwaitia Group, during interrogation, admitted he bribed millions of dollars to Kuwaiti officials, but said it was not his fault that he could not get contracts from the government agencies unless he paid the bribes.

Migrants alleged Shahid charged Tk 7 lakh to Tk 9 lakh for recruitment, but many have been paid less than what was spelled out in their contracts charged for renewal of work permits or were even not provided the jobs.

Bangladesh's Anti-Corruption Commission has opened an investigation against him on allegations that he laundered Tk 1,400 crore. Recently, a travel ban was imposed on his family members.

Doctor held on charge of raping employee

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pirojpur

Police arrested a physician in Pirojpur town on Thursday night in connection with a rape case filed by a 17-year-old girl, who worked at the doctor's chamber.

The case was filed at Pirojpur sadar police station against 55-year-old Mohammad Shah Alam, a MBBS doctor, on Thursday night under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, said Md Nurul Islam Badal, officer in charge (OC) of the police station.

The OC said the girl took the job of an office assistant at the private chamber of the doctor on June 17 to support her family. Her office hour was from 9am to 3pm.

According to the case statement, on Wednesday around 2pm, Mohammad Shah Alam raped the girl when there was no one in the chamber. He also broke the girl's cellphone when she tried to capture his photograph following the incident.

On Friday, the girl was sent to Pirojpur civil surgeon's office for her medical test and the accused was sent to jail through the court, said the OC.

'Drug dealer' killed in 'gunfight' with police in Teknaf

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

An alleged drug peddler was killed in a "shootout" with police in Cox's Bazar's Teknaf upazila early yesterday.

The dead is Abul Hashem, 32, said police.

On information that a yaba consignment will be unloaded in the Fishery Ghat area, a police team raided there around 12:30am, said Pradip Kumar Das, officer-in-charge of Teknaf Police Station.

Sensing the presence of police, criminals opened fire. The law enforcers retaliated, triggering the "gunfight", he said.

After the "gun battle", police found the bullet-hit body of Hashem lying on the spot. His cohorts managed to flee, the OC said.

Doctors of Teknaf Upazila Health Complex declared him dead, the police officer added.

Police also claimed to have recovered 10,000 yaba pills, a firearm, and six bullets from the spot.

The Daily Star, however, could not independently verify the police claim.

His body was sent to Cox's Bazar Sadar Hospital for an autopsy, the OC added.