

BANGLADESH UPDATE



1,278
New cases in 24hrs



3,75,870
Total cases



5,477
Deaths



2,89,912
Recoveries



1,069,182
Deaths



36,934,836
Total cases

Stressed, bored

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badly, psychologists said.
Many of these students lost their near and dear ones to Covid-19 and it is possible that they might develop post-traumatic stress disorder in case they fail to recover from their losses, they warned.

Against this backdrop, the country observes the World Mental Health Day today.

The past months have brought many challenges for students, especially to adapt to attending classes online from home, with little contact with teachers and friends, and amid anxiety about their future, the World Health Organisation said in its website ahead of the Day.

Given past experience of emergencies, it is expected that the need for mental health and psychosocial support will substantially increase in the coming months and years, it said.

On March 17, the government closed the schools to contain the spread of coronavirus. The shutdown was extended till October 30. The authorities have yet to decide when to reopen educational institutions.

Educational activities of about four crore students are being hampered due to the crisis.

"Due to the closure, many students are feeling suffocated, which is stressing them out," Azizur Rahman, an honorary professor at Dhaka University's psychology department, told The Daily Star yesterday.

"These students have become restless and uncontrollable... They can't concentrate on anything... This will negatively impact their mental and physical developments," he said, adding that many of these children might not be able to forget the miserable memories.

Lt Col Hafez Md Zonayed Ahmed, principal of Bishreshtha Munshi Abdur Rouf Public College, said they witnessed that many of their students were stressed and bored a few days after the coronavirus-driven shutdown was enforced.

Many got hooked to cell phone gaming, chatting and social media platforms.

But after the introduction of sessions between parents and psychiatrists and through online counselling, the

situation improved. "Students are feeling a bit more relaxed now," he said.

Prof Kamal Uddin, another teacher at the DU's psychology department, said children were being deprived of their normal academic and other activities with their peer groups and it would certainly leave a negative impact on them.

Kamal said teachers must communicate with their students online and talk to them frequently to keep them stress-free.

Noted educationist Rasheda K Choudhury too said the ongoing school closure could lead to mental and physical problems in children.

Students at different levels would face different problems, she said.

For example, primary students will simply miss their friends and schools while university students can be worried about their future, especially about jobs, said, Rasheda, executive director of Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE).

She said there should be social campaigns on the importance of mental health of students. "Apart from the government, all social and voluntary organisations should come forward and help these students."

She also said the government should train teachers on taking care of students' mental health.

Contacted, Education Minister Dipu Moni said the government has taken various steps to reduce students' stress. Also, counsellors will be appointed at district level in this regard, she said.

"These counsellors will provide training on how to deal with mental health issues to at least two teachers, including a female one," she said.

Director General Syed Md Golam Faruk of Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education said they have already started initiatives to appoint the counsellors.

"We will arrange views-exchange programmes in all regions and experts will sit with officials, teachers and guardians to discuss the mental health issue," he added.

Primary and Mass Education Secretary Akram-Al-Hossain said primary teachers were maintaining communications with students amid the pandemic.



With all educational institutions closed due to the Covid-19 outbreak, this classroom of a school in the capital's Kakrail area is now left empty for around seven months. The long period of closure has led to a major disruption to education. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Definition slanted against victims

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"I was not raped during the incident seen on video," the survivor told the police, even though she herself described in the first information report that the perpetrators used their hands as instruments in carrying out multiple acts of insertion.

It may have been that the survivor used "rape" to mean penile-vaginal penetration, which was not committed during the incident portrayed by the video. The survivor was, however, allegedly raped multiple times before by the prime accused Delwar.

"Attempt to rape" and "rape" charges have vastly different sentences -- the charge of rape carries a life sentence, whereas "attempt to rape" commits perpetrators between five and 10 years. The different sentences were set to reflect on the supposed proportionality of the crime.

But is the brutality of being raped with a stick, or hands, or the violence exhibited in the video in any way less severe in proportion than penile-vaginal rape?

"If we look at the global modern rape laws, this type of penetration [with objects or other body parts] and penile penetration are equally punishable offences and deserve an equal degree of punishment," Yasmin said, adding that not considering this rape evaluates it as a "lesser degree offence".

She said this also plays out practically as the "weight of the case gets lighter".

Nina Goswami, senior deputy director of Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), said the lack of definition is a huge impediment to getting convictions in cases.

"This is why people give the highest priority to medical reports in rape cases, where there must be human semen. And that's why the perpetrators are not punished in most cases," she said.

"Without the presence of human semen, the victim's oral testimony and other witnesses' statements would be the major testimony but it is difficult to prove in reality, because getting the right witnesses is also difficult in rape cases. And this is how the cases become weak," she concluded.

The current conviction rate is unknown, although a statistic presented in an event called "National dialogue on action against sexual violence" organised last year by Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and the United Nations in Bangladesh stated it to be as low as three percent.

Earlier this year, this newspaper, quoting statistics of Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum, reported that around three children are being raped in Bangladesh each day.

Nina Goswami pointed out that the narrow definition of "sexual intercourse with a woman" also makes it difficult to prosecute male rape.

"We have long been demanding this, as time has come to rethink and reform the definition. In fact, we cannot deal with the male child rape cases under this definition and these are dealt with by other laws as 'unnatural offences'," said Goswami.

The same goes for the rape of hijra or transgender individuals.

Furthermore, the law explicitly states that "Sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under thirteen years of age, is not rape", thereby failing to criminalise marital rape. By not giving legal protection for victims of marital rape, the law ends up stating that marriage absolves an individual of the need to take consent before sexual intercourse.

But the definition is hardly the only section that needs reform, opined lawyers.

Rape survivors routinely have to

face being defamed at court by The Evidence Act 1872 -- according to the provision of law, the complainant's character is judged so as to understand the merit of the complaint. That means the "character" of the rape survivor is directly used to judge whether or not her allegation is real.

"Section 155(4) of the Evidence Act 1872, expressly allows defence lawyers to introduce character evidence against rape complainants during trial," stated a report published by Bangladesh Legal Aid Services Trust (BLAST) titled "Between 'Virtue' and 'Immorality': Why Character Evidence Must Be Prohibited in Rape Cases".

In courts, defence lawyers try to establish a "lack of morality" in rape survivors by divulging details of their personal lives as a way of undermining their credibility, explains the report.

"Why does the raped woman need to prove her character in court?" said Salma Ali, eminent women's rights lawyer.

"In the Begumganj case, the survivor was separated from her husband for years. Will that be used against her as character evidence? In the context of our villages, it made her more vulnerable to rapists. Men consider themselves to be entitled to these single women," she said.

"If the character of the rape complainant can be proved immoral, it can impeach the testimony of the victim. And the victim then needs to prove her moral character. But what is the moral character, and up to who's standard? The character of a person cannot be relevant in a rape case, even if I'm a sex worker; I have the right to file a case for rape because the legal element is consent," said Taslima Yasmin.

As Salma Ali said, "The focus should be on more convictions. We need speedy trials and proper implementation of current punishments."

Troubles over Covid tests

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flights," said the civil surgeon.

For example, Civil Surgeon Moinul said five Saudi-bound people reached the sample collection centre around 9:30am on Wednesday and said their flight was at 2:30pm.

"After checking their travel documents, we hurriedly collected their samples and sent those to the nearby National Institute of Preventive and Social Medicine for Covid-19 testing," he said.

"While taking samples for the tests, we advised them to go to the airport [Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport] for completing formalities to board the flight. Otherwise, they might miss the flight."

The civil surgeon said they sent the Covid-19 test reports to the airport's health centre within four hours at 1:30pm and the five Saudi-bound people printed their reports from there.

Dr Moinul said they completed their tests under special arrangements. But if the arrangement did not work, the five had to miss their flight. "And in that case who will take the responsibility?" he questioned.

On September 27, he said they delivered a Covid-19 test report within just hours of sample collection to a Saudi-bound expatriate Bangladeshi worker.

The efficiency of the staffers set an example and helped Mir Abdus Salam catch his flight to go to Riyadh.

Moinul said usually, they are supposed to get 48 hours as per the guideline of the Saudi Arabian Airlines for a coronavirus test.

He said it might not be possible for them to carry out Covid-19 tests under special arrangement all the time. Public money would be lost as many kits are damaged while carrying out such rapid tests, he added.

The civil surgeon said the Saudi Arabian Airlines should issue tickets and set flight schedules in a way so that

people can get 48 hours to do their tests.

"But the Saudi Arabian Airlines are issuing tickets and setting flight schedules in such a way that we are not getting even 24 hours to carry out a Covid-19 test."

Tarik A Alowaidi, country manager of the airlines, could not be reached for his comments.

Moinul said they are scheduled to stop collecting blood samples after 2:00pm. But considering the plight of the remittance-earning workers, they have been collecting samples till the evening for the last two days due to huge rush of passengers.

Talking to this correspondent, several Saudi-bound workers blamed Saudi Arabian Airlines officials and travel agents for issuing tickets and confirming their flight schedules without not giving them the required time to do the coronavirus tests.

Saudi Arabian Airlines and Biman Bangladesh Airlines are now operating 19 weekly flights from Dhaka.

Around 55,000 stranded Bangladeshis workers have been waiting to return to their workplaces in Saudi Arabia since March due to the pandemic.

Many workers fear that they might lose their jobs if they fail to return to their workplaces in the gulf country by October 30 before the expiry of their visas and iqama.

The government initially designated 19 medical institutions and laboratories to do Covid-19 tests for overseas passengers following the scam of Regent Hospital and JKC health care in testing Covid-19.

At present, Covid-19 test is being carried out in Dhaka by three institutions -- National Institute of Laboratory Medicine and Referral Centre, Institute of Public Health and National Institute of Preventive and Social Medicine.

Dhaka North City Corporation Market is the only sample collection centre for expatriate workers.

WFP wins the Nobel Peace Prize

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prevent the use of hunger as a weapon of war and conflict, and said the Covid-19 pandemic, which the WFP says could double hunger worldwide, had made it even more relevant.

"Until the day we have a medical vaccine, food is the best vaccine against chaos," the Nobel committee said in its citation.

"There is an estimate within the World Food Programme that ... there will be 265 million starving people within a year, so of course this is also a call to the international community not to underfund the World Food Programme."

WFP runs a logistics service that has dispatched medical cargoes to over 120 countries throughout the pandemic to help governments and health partners fighting Covid-19.

It also has provided passenger services to ferry humanitarian and health workers where commercial flights were unavailable.

"At a time when we are living through a global pandemic, the need for food, humanitarian help has intensified," Reiss-Andersen told Reuters.

SPEECHLESS
WFP Executive Director David Beasley, travelling in Niger, posted a video statement on social media.

"It's because of the WFP family," he

said. "They are out there in the most difficult, complex places in the world, where there's war, conflict, climate extremes -- it doesn't matter. They are out there and they deserve this award..."

"This is the first time I've been speechless... This is unbelievable," he said. "And wow! Wow! Wow! Wow!"

In a written statement, he added: "Today is a reminder that food security, peace and stability go together. Without peace, we cannot achieve our global goal of zero hunger; and while there is hunger, we will never have a peaceful world."

In Geneva, WFP spokesman Tomson Phiri told reporters: "When everything went into shutdown mode, the World Food Programme was there. When everyone was leaving and we were going into lockdowns, the World Food Programme had to provide the logistical support that the world deserved, that the world needed."

At one point at the height of the pandemic, as airlines were cutting back flights, the WFP was running the largest operational airline in the world, he said.

Dan Smith, director of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, said the Norwegian Nobel Committee had wanted to send a message of both hope and "support for international cooperation".

Service seekers at the mercy of brokers

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150 paying ones, said the hospital director, Dr ATM M Morshed.

"Before, we would treat and release patients regularly and admit patients five days a week. Due to the pandemic, we have had to cut down indoor services in the hospital," he told The Daily Star.

Currently, new patients are only admitted every Monday and first taken to the isolation unit before being shifted to beds after one week to avoid the risk of Covid-19 spreading among existing patients, he said.

"So, the flow of patient admission has been slower over the last seven months."

This has led to greater pressure on outdoor patient facilities, where many admission seekers are being extorted by brokers for limited serial numbers to get an appointment.

Mid Aziz Matobbar, from Chandra in Faridpur's Bhanga upazila, came early Monday morning to get his 25-year-old son admitted but failed to get a serial number. That meant he could not try again until next Monday.

"My son Md Abdullah was born with a mental illness, which has now become severe. We cannot keep him free at home because of his violent tendencies, so we tie him up with an iron chain," Aziz said.

"After travelling a long distance, I was harassed outside the hospital as there are so many brokers who actually decide who gets to see a doctor."

The brokers tried to pressure him into admitting his son to a private

clinic, he said, but he declined because he cannot afford it.

After waiting all morning, Aziz managed to get an appointment with a doctor at the outdoor facility around noon.

"I was unable to get an appointment with a doctor though I came here early this morning," said Russel Sarkar, from Sirajganj's Ullapara upazila, who brought his mentally challenged brother Abdur Rahim.

He also had to face the brokers. "As I turned them away, I have had to wait for hours," Russel said.

Homemaker Shanjida Shahin from Magura also came to the outdoor patient facilities on Monday morning with her mentally challenged brother Atikul Islam, whose condition had been deteriorating due to a lack of medicine.

Through the brokers, she was able to get an appointment with a doctor at the outdoor facility early in the day, she said.

After prescribing some medication, the doctor asked her to bring her brother again next week and if necessary, he would be admitted to the hospital then.

At the outdoor unit of the hospital, this correspondent found a group of locals, agents of various private clinics and even some hospital staff bargaining with patients' families looking for access to services.

As many patients and their family members come from outside the district, they are often lured by these brokers who promise fast access or treatment elsewhere, hospital sources said.

Demand for justice gets louder

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protestors also staged a sit-in at Kakrail intersection for about 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, teachers and students held a protest rally in Shahbagh under the banner of a newly formed platform -- "Bangladesh against Rape and Impunity". Tanzimuddin Khan, associate professor of DU's International Relations department, said people are victims of deception and the state is playing deceptive games with its people.

Speakers at the programme demanded ending all kinds of repression on indigenous women and forming an anti-repression cell

for women at each institution and organisation as per the High Court's directives.

They also urged the government to take steps to stop hate speech against women at all sorts of programmes, including religious ones, and stop exhibiting women as product in literature, drama, cinema and advertisement.

They also called for stopping mental torture on rape victims during investigation.

At the event, Bangladesh Chhatra Union General Secretary Anik Roy declared a weeklong protest programme. The organisation said it will hold

Starts off

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The new envoy appeared to be spot-on with his tasks in hand, observed Prof Delwar Hossain of International Relations at Dhaka University.

India will surely try to draw its neighbours closer in the changed global geopolitics where rivalry between India and China flared up following the clashes between the troops of the two regional powers, he said.

Interestingly, both the high commissioners -- outgoing Riva Das Ganguly and Doraiswami -- chose to depart from and arrive in Bangladesh through land ports, seemingly to signify India's foreign policy priority on the connectivity with its closest neighbours.

Doraiswami arrived in Bangladesh on October 5 through Tripura border of India, three days after Riva Ganguly Das had left through Benapole border of Bangladesh after completing her one-and-a-half-year tenure here.

Asked about his priorities, Doraiswami on Thursday said he was hoping to bring the relationship back to where it was before the Covid-19 pandemic, which seriously hampered the peoples' movement and economic activities.

"I would like to see specifically the completion of the projects to enhance connectivity," he said.

The envoy said he would like to have more Indian businesses come to Bangladesh and do his best to sort out the issues that exist in the relationship and "fulfil your [Bangladesh's] expectations".

An air bubble agreement could be signed soon to begin flights between Bangladesh and India for the businesses, medical patients and officials as part of economic recovery, said officials.

Apart from Covid-19 vaccine cooperation, Bangladesh will expect the new envoy to push forward the unresolved issues, including water sharing of common rivers and border killings.

India is conducting phase-II trial of its own vaccine Covaxin, apart from eyeing the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine candidate as the likely first shot against Covid-19 to be available by the end of this year.

Doraiswami said when phase III trial of India's own vaccine starts in India soon, the country would like to work with Bangladesh, providing an opportunity for vaccine trial here.

"If it works for you in Bangladesh, we can look forward to partnership in co-production and delivery of vaccine," the diplomat said, adding that they want to do it in a way that ensures provision of vaccines at the most affordable prices and the way that Bangladesh is comfortable with.

During his visit to Tripura, where he visited a number of projects connecting the Northeast of India to Bangladesh, before coming to Bangladesh, he said the Northeast was "central" to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of stronger, resilient and modern India.

Talking to reporters after meeting Tripura Chief Minister Biplob Kumar Deb on October 3, Doraiswami said, "As we develop our relationship with Bangladesh, our most important neighbouring country, it is going to be of great value to both the countries if our connectivity, travel, trade and people-to-people ties grow. To achieve this, Tripura is critical, that's why I am here."

Upon arrival in Bangladesh on October 5, he visited Bangabandhu Memorial Museum on Dhanmondi-32 in Dhaka and paid rich tributes to the memories of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

On Friday, he visited the National Memorial in Savar and paid tributes to Liberation War martyrs by placing a floral wreath at the monument.

"Your Liberation War remains an inspiration to the world. It will always be our abiding honour to have offered you our support, just as we in India offer your bravery our respectful salute, nearly fifty years later," he said.

Today, Doraiswami said, Bangladesh is equally respected for the remarkable improvements it has recorded in social indices and sustained economic growth at the fastest pace in South Asia.

The Bangladesh-India relationship is based on shared sacrifice, shared history and culture, and on the uniquely close ties of kinship, he said.

"I want to underline this point. There is not, and will never be, a diminution of the highest level of importance that Bangladesh holds in India," he added.

an anti-rape photo exhibition, cultural rally, film festival, women rally and cycle rally to press home its demand.

If the government fails to meet their demand, they will organise a long march to Begumganj of Noakhali from the capital's Shahbagh on October 16 and hold a rally in Begumganj the following day.

Meanwhile, a DU female student continued her hunger strike until death yesterday at the base of Raju Memorial Sculpture, demanding the arrest of former Ducus VP Nurul and five others in connection with a rape case.