

BANGLADESH UPDATE



5,13,510
New cases in 24hrs



1,014
Total cases



7,559
Deaths



4,57,459
Recoveries



GLOBAL UPDATE



1,816,214
Deaths



83,265,492
Total cases

Reuniting with families after months of ordeal

Two Rohingya men join their loved ones at Bhasan Char after perilous journey to Malaysia ended in disaster

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA from Bhasan Char

Din Mohammad had made up his mind to go to Malaysia in desperate want of a better life.

A Rohingya refugee from the cramped camps of Cox's Bazar, he contacted one of his fellow Rohingyas in Malaysia and made all the arrangements for his journey.

One fine morning in March last year, he left on a perilous overcrowded voyage from Teknaf coast, leaving behind his new-born son.

With 330 others, he approached the Malaysian coast. The Malaysian navy drove their boat away and after sailing on the Bay of Bengal for nearly three months, the Bangladesh Navy rescued them in May.

"There was no food. No water. One had already died. We were dying on the boat. The navy rescued us and

took us to Bhasan Char," Din told this correspondent.

The group has been on Bhasan Char since then and Din had not been able to see his wife and only son.

Finally, on December 29, the family was reunited when his wife and son arrived on Bhasan Char along with the second batch of Rohingya refugees from Cox's Bazar.

Ayatullah was also on same boat. He too was reunited with his family members on the same day.

He left his mother and one brother in the Cox's Bazar camps when he decided to travel to Malaysia.

His mother, his son Arafat and his brothers also arrived at Bhasan Char with Din Mohammad's wife and son.

"My wife had left me when I failed to enter Malaysia. My mother was alone there with my son and younger brother. Now they have come [to

Bhasan Char] and I am really glad to be with them again," he said.

The two families have been allotted rooms on the island along with other necessities.

Both Ayatullah and Din said if they get a job it would help them repay their debts and lead a better life.

Ayatullah spent 2.80 lakh to go to Malaysia.

But interestingly, none of them can say who the brokers were or to whom exactly they paid the money.

Asked, they said they simply trusted their friends from Myanmar who were living in Malaysia.

A total of 306 Rohingyas were rescued by the Bangladesh Navy on April and May last year and were taken to the island.

In the first phase, a total of 1,642 Rohingyas arrived at Bhasan Char and in 1,804 arrived in the second phase.



A schoolboy takes his set of brand new textbooks from Education Minister Dipu Moni at the launching ceremony of the countrywide textbook distribution programme in the capital's Bangabandhu International Conference Center. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina attended the event virtually.

PHOTO: PID

Rising from the rubble

FROM PAGE 1

To protect the people and the economy, the government rolled out a massive Tk 120,000-crore stimulus package, one of the largest in the world. It capped bank interest rates below single digit to help firms and businesses borrow at a record low rate.

Multilateral banks and bilateral partners poured billions of dollars to cushion Bangladesh.

But the biggest support came from farmers who continue to feed the country and the migrant workers who proved the grim forecasts wrong, sending home a record amount of remittance.

The robust flow of remittance lifted the country's foreign exchange reserves to record highs and put the country on a firm footing.

The reopening of the economy in June was a very bold move and proved to be a judicious one, as the Covid situation did not go out of control.

The food production, remittance, the stimulus package, the reopening, and the uptick in domestic demand and exports put the country on the path of recovery.

"Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, Bangladesh was able to escape a contraction in 2020," UK-based Centre for Economics and Business Research said early this week.

Bangladesh's GDP growth is forecast to drop to 3.8 percent in 2020, compared to 8.2 percent in the previous year. The government debt as a percentage of

the GDP rose to 39.6 percent in 2020, considered low as per the international standards.

The government had a fiscal deficit of 6.8 percent in 2020, which allowed it to spend a huge amount of money to cushion the economy.

"This will have bolstered the economy in the past months," the think-tank said.

It also mentioned, "While the harm to public health inflicted by the pandemic has been relatively limited, the effect of the outbreak on global demand and international supply chains means that the economic damage has been considerable."

Despite the pandemic, Bangladesh is set to post the third-highest growth in the world and the highest in Asia in 2020, according to the International Monetary Fund.

In terms of growth, only Guyana and South Sudan are ahead of Bangladesh. India's GDP would contract by 10.3 percent and Pakistan's by 0.4 percent.

Of the 190 IMF member countries, only 23 are forecast to post a positive growth in the outgoing year.

Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal said the prime minister had taken effective measures that fuelled domestic demand and helped people survive the crisis.

As a result, Bangladesh has been able to keep up the growth trajectory during the crisis, he noted.

"Other than Bangladesh, you will not

find any country in Asia that has been able to maintain progress in every area of the macro-economy," he told The Daily Star.

Zaid Bakht, a former research director of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), said the impact of the pandemic has not been as adverse as it was thought initially.

"The economy has weathered the impacts of the pandemic and is now on track for a recovery."

People are trying to get back on their feet again and ride out the financial hardship due to job losses. "They are trying to do something to make a living," he noted.

Mustafizur Rahman, a distinguished fellow of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, pointed out that Bangladesh's major indicators such as export, import, balance of payment, credit growth, private sector investment and foreign direct investment were in a fragile state even before the pandemic.

"This is largely because Bangladesh's major trading destinations had already been facing the impacts of coronavirus from January."

In Bangladesh, poverty rose to 30 percent and unemployment to 40 percent, Mustafizur mentioned.

The government's massive stimulus package helped the economy, but it is yet to recover fully, he noted.

"Most of the countries are likely to have negative growth this year."

According to Mustafizur, the country's reliance on the hardest-hit sectors such as export and tourism is relatively low compared to other countries. Domestic demand is the major driving force behind the economy.

Everyone had warned about disasters in health, economy and food sectors. "We needed to worry about health and economy. We did very well in the food sector. It is an area of strength of Bangladesh."

Revenue collection would go up if there were robust economic activities. But it remains low, meaning trade and commerce have not returned to the pre-pandemic level, Mustafizur observed.

The country's export is far away from the pre-Covid level, and the import of capital machinery is still negative.

The regulatory challenges have to be sorted out, and the planned economic zones have to be ready, he added.

Zahid Hussain, former lead economist at the World Bank's Dhaka office, said the good news is that 2020 is now in the rear-view mirror.

"The bad news is we can't be sure whether the unprecedented distress suffered globally in the year gone by is also a thing of the past."

The economy is recovering, but it is not yet back on track to a faster and sustainable growth with investments still depressed and external demand wavering, he pointed out.

"I hope 2021 will get us back to a

sustainable growth track as the world economy and domestic demand turn around."

Making some suggestions for the days ahead, Monzur Hossain, research director at Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, said that moving forward, the government should put more focus on creating jobs and bringing more poor people under social safety nets.

"There should be a more proactive and innovative role in extending stimulus packages to SMEs [small and medium enterprises]."

Many vulnerable groups have become even more vulnerable. The government should support them, he noted.

The finance minister is confident that Bangladesh's agriculture, manufacturing and service sectors will achieve more in the next six months than what they did in the last six months.

"Bangladesh will not come under major stress due to the second wave of coronavirus like it did in the first wave."

Asked about further stimulus package, he said, "The prime minister is very flexible about it. She will do whatever necessary."

"We have adopted an expansionary policy and we are pursuing it to achieve our objectives. I don't think that we will get stuck anywhere."

Referring to the second wave of virus infections, Zaid Bakht said some risk factors surfaced again because of it. "We

have to wait to see how the second wave plays out."

The government should keep supporting the economy like it has been doing since the pandemic hit the country in March, he suggested.

"We have to roll out vaccines to boost the morale of the people. A mass immunisation programme will help the economy rebound quickly," added Bakht.

Echoing his opinion, Zahid Hussain said, "Getting a critical mass of the population vaccinated in 2021 will be the key to taming the virus locally."

Optimism is in the air with the arrival of Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca vaccines that promise a high degree of efficacy in debilitating the virus.

"Rejuvenating structural reforms, ensuring policy support to efficient enterprises faced with existential threat due to the pandemic, and strengthening the social protection system will be key to accelerating recovery while leaving no one behind," he noted.

Correction

In the story titled "Vulnerability exposed", published by this newspaper on its front page on Thursday, it was mistakenly mentioned that the global death toll from Covid-19 was 18 million, which should have been 1.8 million. We regret the error.

A dehumanising Year

FROM PAGE 1

upon us, and remain happily ignorant. Most other countries would have, by now, conducted a plethora of research as to why, and would have known by now what worked for us and built on that natural immunity to save us from its more lethal mutated variety, which we are now hearing about.

The question of the moment is with what learning we are entering the new year.

First and the foremost is building a robust health sector. Public health infrastructure needs a massive refurbishment in terms of operational efficiency with affordable and reliable health services for our people. Judging purely on the basis of infrastructure, we are in a position to extend effective healthcare for a majority of our people. There are 13,500 community health clinics at the union level, 421 health complexes at the upazila level, 64 full-fledged hospitals at the district level, tertiary level major hospitals at every divisional headquarters including 35 specialised hospitals spread all over the country. Added to this there are 5,321 private hospitals and clinics and 9,529 diagnostic centres, 106 medical colleges (36 public and 70 private). For a population of 170 million, this facility may not be adequate but for a country like ours, this national health service

capacity makes for a formidable base to build on.

What we desperately lack is service delivery, whose focus is people and not simply machines and buildings. We know of successive governments' efforts to keep our doctors at the location of their work, an effort that has not succeeded. However, during the pandemic, we saw a totally different level of commitment and awareness from our frontline healthcare workers. We need to build on it.

If we are to tackle this pandemic effectively in 2021 and prepare for the ones that have been predicted by the director general of WHO, we must shift our focus purely from infrastructure building to providing service. This requires a massive transformation of how we operate, how we think, how we manage, how we budget, how we spend and how we value our health service doctors, nurses, specialists and the technical staff.

There have been several instances of corruption and waste in handling the current health crisis. Government is rightly preparing for mass vaccination for which it will dole out huge amounts of money. Given our past experiences, we cannot rule out the possibility of corruption, waste, misuse and mismanagement. We must take preventive measures now.

Our second learning deals with the education sector. The pandemic has truly exacerbated the already existing digital divide. Clearly, those who had, could handle and could get accustomed to the new technology got some learning done during this period compared to those who could not – meaning the poor, who got totally left out of the learning loop and for them 2020 was, for all practical purposes, a lost year.

While the digital divide became more acute, it is in e-learning where the solution lies. We believe that the existing school, college and university level education, which is based on classroom-based face-to-face learning, needs an overhaul. In the future, a large number of students gathering every day for the full duration of their session may not be feasible and not even advisable. As some educationists are suggesting, we should form a "blended" approach, which is a mixture of the existing class-based education with a high degree of digitisation.

This will require massive investment, retraining of our teachers – a highly difficult and so far mostly unsuccessful undertaking – equipping our schools, colleges and universities to make the best use of this technology and finally preparing the necessary educational material, the software, for a proper

education of our students.

The prospect of digital education is enormous. Think of how the latest educational materials – both nationally and internationally produced – can be made available to the lowest level of our schools at the same time as it becomes available to the best of them. Also think of all the educational aids that can be made available to our poor and differently-abled children. All our schools can have the same level of education if we can do it properly. But for that our teachers need to be retrained – no easy task.

An important change that we need in our higher education is putting the necessary emphasis on research. Our universities, now numbering hundred or more, public and private combined, spend very little money on research. Here the government has to come forward and start funding innovation and creation of new knowledge, which can only be done through research by both students and the faculty. We simply cannot overemphasise the need for original thinking.

The third takeaway is that we will have to hugely strengthen our IT infrastructure for the economy, education, health, transportation and, most importantly, good governance. Our internet has to be high speed, cheap and uninterrupted. IT is no longer a

technology, an industry or a growth sector; it is our new way of life. Smart devices will have to be affordable and widely available. The policy framework will have to encourage local production of most of these items, which we are capable of. Our start-ups are already making impressive headways in ways that give us tremendous confidence in their abilities to break new ground in this highly competitive and exciting area.

In this field we must invest in artificial intelligence (AI) and biotechnology and their interface. The future revolution will be a mixture of these two disciplines. We must start seriously looking to them right away.

My final takeaway would be that we take a more comprehensive, multi-sectoral and effective action-oriented plan on climate change. A new 10-year climate change strategy is in the offing. As planning goes, this one will also be striking the right notes and highlighting the appropriate priorities but while implementing, we may repeat the same miserable records as in the past. While we rightly blame the big polluters of the world for the current miserable state of affairs, we fall terribly short in doing things that we need to for our own survival. Polluting, encroaching and dumping chemical waste into our

rivers is perhaps the biggest and most dramatic example of the gap between our words about saving nature and deeds of destroying it.

The new year and the new decade that we enter today confronts us with totally unknown challenges. It is almost like teaching us how to live our lives and build our societies all over again. More fundamentally it is teaching us to rebuild human relationships and how we are to interact – something that we have been doing for thousands of years but will have to do differently now.

In this "new normal" what new things are we learning to do? It is the same politics, the same blame game, the same "all mistakes are done by others", the same "we know everything", the same "othering", the same custodial deaths, the disappearances, the same arbitrary arrests, the same gagging of the press and the same self-certification galore. Can such habits both of the mind and functioning of our system serve us in the New Year that is desperately crying out for new thinking, new attitudes, new values in facing the new reality?

Wishing all our patrons, advertisers and, most importantly, readers for staying with us and supporting us in every way possible. Hoping that the New Year will bring greater happiness and success, both in personal and professional life. A very happy 2021.

“পূবালী ব্যাংকে সফল করুন নিরাপদে থাকুন”

2021
HAPPY NEW YEAR

May every day of the New Year glow with
Happy Banking, Joy and Blessings

পূবালী ব্যাংক লিমিটেড
PUBALI BANK LIMITED

Direct bus service on the cards

FROM PAGE 1

"We have received Indian proposal in this regard recently and are now scrutinising all necessary aspects," said Sultana Yasmin, a deputy secretary of Road Transport and Highway Division, which looks after connectivity issues.

They called a meeting on January 13 to discuss all relevant issues, she told The Daily Star yesterday.

Representatives of the National Board of Revenue, foreign ministry, home ministry, commerce ministry, Roads and Highways Department (RHD), Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) and Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC) are expected to join.

BRTC authorities were asked to give their opinion over commencement of passenger bus services, sources said.

The development came a year after the trial run of direct bus services on the Dhaka-Gangtok and Dhaka-Darjeeling routes via Siliguri, conducted in December last year, aiming to boost cross-border passenger services.

After the trial run – conducted following the countries' agreement in principle to launch direct bus services – it was found that direct bus service between Dhaka-Gangtok and Dhaka-Darjeeling would not be smooth due to the narrow roads from Siliguri, a member of the trail team said.

"So both countries decided to launch the Dhaka-Siliguri direct bus service. Passengers would be able to go to Darjeeling and Gangtok using smaller vehicles from there," he said.

Currently, passengers have to change buses at the border to go to West Bengal's Siliguri.

Amjad Hossain, spokesperson of BRTC, said, "Both countries agreed to open the route and work on signing agreement and protocol is now going on. We are hopeful of starting bus operations within two weeks after connectivity of both countries is restored."

Passenger bus services between Bangladesh and India have been suspended since March due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Amjad, also general manager (accounts) of BRTC, said Shyamoli NR Travels operates buses on all five routes and they are considering allowing it to operate buses on the new route.

Suvenker Ghosh Rakesh, managing director of Shyamoli, said they are ready to operate the bus when authorities ask them to.

Distance between Dhaka and Darjeeling via Siliguri is around 450 kilometres whereas distance between Dhaka and Gangtok via Siliguri is around 500km.

Currently, buses operate on five cross-border routes.