

1990  
New cases in 24hrs



5,14,500  
Total cases



7,575  
Deaths



4,58,656  
Recoveries



1,830,161  
Deaths



84,979,836  
Total cases



## Singapore, Malaysia scrap high speed railway after delays

AFP, Singapore

Singapore and neighbouring Malaysia have scrapped plans for a high-speed rail line after failing to agree on changes, officials said yesterday, finally abandoning a costly and long-troubled project.

The 350-kilometre (217-mile) rail network was expected to cut travel time between Singapore and the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur to 90 minutes from the four or more hours by car today.

Singapore and Malaysia signed a deal to build the bullet train line in 2016, but its fate was thrown into doubt after the election of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad two years later.

Mahathir said he wanted to scrap

the project as part of an effort to review major infrastructure projects approved by his scandal-tainted predecessor in a bid to cut the country's debt.

Construction was then suspended for two years at Malaysia's request, with plans to commence service in 2031.

The project was terminated after a final deadline on December 31, and after both governments failed to reach an agreement over changes proposed by Malaysia.

"In light of the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the Malaysian economy, the Government of Malaysia had proposed several changes to the HSR Project," said a joint statement by current Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.



Jubilant students, left, at a primary school in Barishal city show off new textbooks they received yesterday, the first day of the new year. Children look at their books at another school in Chattogram city. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurated the distribution of free textbooks on Thursday.

PHOTO: STAR

## Students get free textbooks

FROM PAGE 1

However, no book festivals will be held this year marking the distribution of textbooks due to the pandemic.

The books will be handed over to the students at their respective educational institutions in 12 days to avoid any kind of gathering.

Prof Narayan Chandra Saha, chairman of the National Curriculum and Textbook Board, told BSS that changes were made to the cover of the books this time marking the "Mujib Year".

Photographs of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, great Liberation War, Language Movement and various development projects of the present government have been printed with captions on the back page of the textbooks, he said.

According to the primary and mass education ministry, the demand of textbooks for primary students in 2021 is about 10.25 crore.

A total of 213,288 books printed in special language will be distributed among 94,275 ethnic students (Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Garo and Sadri) of pre-primary to third grades. The books have been printed in five

languages.

This time, Braille books will be distributed among 9,196 visually impaired students.

According to the education ministry, over 24 crore books will be printed for the secondary level students in 2021.

Syed Md Golam Faruk, director general of the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education, said educational institutions across the country have been closed since March last year due to the pandemic.

"Despite the coronavirus situation, we are trying to reach new books to students across the country on time," he said.

He urged the teachers, students and parents to follow hygiene rules while distributing books at the educational institutions.

The Awami League government celebrates "book festival" on January 1 every year with the aim of improving the standard of education and lowering the dropout rate.

In the last 10 years, about 331.47 crore primary and secondary level books have been distributed across the country.

## Long road to justice

FROM PAGE 1

of law enforcers and eventually found him being treated at Dhaka Medical College Hospital in police custody.

There, the family learnt that he was sentenced to 10 years in prison in a narcotics case.

"Pallabi police arrested my son because his father Yeasin was the namesake of a fugitive's father. That family also lives in Mirpur," Banu said.

After the arrest, police tortured Arman to get him to admit to a crime he never committed, she said, adding that police took him to the hospital after he fell unconscious.

Banu said she went from one office to another with the evidence proving that Arman was not the fugitive whose name is Shahabuddin.

Even the National Identity Card could not convince the police and the lower court, she said, adding that the family often faced threats from police.

Contacted, Sub-inspector Russell who was with the Pallabi Police Station at the time, said the detective, who investigated the case, should be blamed for the mistaken identity.

He added that the officer wrote in the chargesheet that the accused was named Sahabuddin alias Arman and his father's name was Yeasin alias Mohiuddin.

"We got the warrant from court and followed the names," said SI Russell, who now works at Mirpur Model

Police station.

The Detective Branch on August 30, 2005 arrested Shahabuddin with 40 bottles of Phensedyl. He was released on bail on March 5, 2007 and he has since been absconding.

A special court in Dhaka sentenced Shahabuddin and two of his cohorts to 10 years in prison and fined them Tk 5,000 each.

But Pallabi police on January 30, 2016, arrested Arman after receiving a warrant from the trial court.

Before he got arrested, Arman was the breadwinner of his family at Bihari Camp in Pallabi. He used to earn Tk 6,000-8,000 a week. After he got arrested, his mother and wife had to work as house staff to feed themselves.

The legal battle cost the family around Tk 2.45 lakh. "We are still in debt of Tk 1 lakh," said Banu.

Arman's 12-year-old daughter Emi and four-year-old son are waiting to see their father.

The incident harks back to the ordeal faced by jute mill worker Jaha Alam, who was also wrongly arrested.

The HC directed the inspector general of police to give Arman Tk 20 lakh in compensation and ordered the IGP and Dhaka Metropolitan Police commissioner to withdraw four officers who worked at Pallabi Police Station during the incident.

The HC observed that the incident is a collective failure of the police department.

## India okays Oxford vaccine

FROM PAGE 1

DOSING REGIMEN?

Britain became the first country this week to authorise the AstraZeneca vaccine, moving ahead of other western countries as it seeks to stem a record surge of infections driven by a highly contagious form of the virus that has also surfaced in India.

The AstraZeneca shot is being manufactured in India by Serum Institute of India (SII), the world's biggest producer of vaccines, which has already stockpiled about 50 million doses.

Though the Indian government has not yet signed a purchase agreement with SII, the company says it will focus on the home market first, and then exports - mainly to South Asian countries and Africa.

Questions about the degree of effectiveness of the AstraZeneca shot have surrounded it since data published in November showed a divergence in success rates, which the developers said reflected different dosing regimens.

Britain's medicines regulator further clouded the picture this week when it said that it had found an 80% success rate when two full doses were administered, three months apart, higher than the average that the developers themselves had found.

'EMERGENCY VALIDATION'

The World Health Organization on Thursday granted emergency validation to the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, paving

the way for countries worldwide to quickly approve its import and distribution.

WHO said the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine was the first to receive its "emergency validation" since the coronavirus first broke out in China a year ago.

"This is a very positive step towards ensuring global access to Covid-19 vaccines," said Mariangela Simao, a top WHO official tasked with ensuring access to medicines.

"But I want to emphasise the need for an even greater global effort to achieve enough vaccine supply to meet the needs of priority populations everywhere," she said in a statement.

WHO said its emergency use listing opens the way for regulators in different countries to approve the import and distribution of the vaccine, reports AFP.

It said it also enables Unicef, which plays a key logistical role in distributing anti-Covid vaccines, and the Pan-American Health Organization to procure the vaccine for countries that need it.

WHO convened its own experts and those from around the world to review the data on the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine's "safety, efficacy and quality," weighing the benefits against the risks.

"The review found that the vaccine met the must-have criteria for safety and efficacy set out by WHO, and that the benefits of using the vaccine to address Covid-19 offset potential risks," it said.

## Hit hard, yet resilient

FROM PAGE 1

Islam of the Institute of Water and Flood Management at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) in late November.

The Flood Forecasting & Warning Centre (FFWC) predicted floods every single month between June and October.

In June, FFWC forecast that the rivers in the north-east and south-east would cross the danger zone. In July there was the expected monsoon where the FFWC predicted flooding for the entire top half of the country, the centre, and the south-east.

In August, the FFWC forecast rains due to a depression in the Bay, and said that the sea-level was between 1-2 feet higher. It cautioned against floods in the entirety of the south-west.

It further said the water levels of major rivers in these districts were "much higher than even the water level observed during Cyclone Amphan."

"It was the worst flood in 20 years," Arifuzzaman Bhuiyan, the executive engineer of FFWC, said. "The magnitude of the flood was unusual."

By the beginning of August, as much as \$42 million worth of crops were destroyed, according to government estimates.

These August floods spelled doom for Abdur Rashed, a fish farmer from Lebubunia village in Gabura union of Sathkira.

"I used to lease about two bighas of land to cultivate fish. Cyclone Amphan flooded my gher [enclosure] and my fish got washed away. My home too was swept away. But that was early in the year and the waters still have not receded... now I am living with my family in a thatched tent on the embankment."

Rashed's neighbours stated that prior to the floods, he was doing well, and was not plagued by poverty. While he currently works as a day labourer, it is not often that he finds work.

All three of his children have dropped out of school and his sixth-grader son was sent to work in a brick kiln far away. "But he couldn't tolerate

the working conditions and came back. After all he is very little... only in class six," Rashed lamented.

The Water Development Board's north-western zonal chief engineer AKM Shafiqul Haque said, "It is normal for the waters of different beels to be the last to recede, but this time, the floods just kept coming. The zone witnessed five floods, which was unusual. Before the rivers could drain the waters of one flood, another one followed suit."

These surprise floods also spelled doom for sexagenarian sharecropper Abdus Samad of Kalmati in Lalmonirhat.

"The waters receded by August, so I planted eggplant, radish and coriander, investing Tk 15,000 in my six bighas of land," said Samad, "but a surprise flood in the last week of August ruined my crops."

"Then again," he added, "I planted in September, investing around the same amount. But another flood came in October washing away my investment."

He has been a farmer for 30 years and lives in a two-room corrugated tin house with six family members -- not a family which can easily absorb a Tk 30,000 shock.

Last year was also the year of record rainfall and as reported in this newspaper in November: "the country has witnessed around 50 percent more rainfall in the first nine months of this year, compared to the average rainfall in the corresponding period during the last 30 years."

This meant that even though Tota Miah's land in Damua Chala village in Gazipur's Kapasia was only flooded during the monsoon, the erratic rain ruined 2.5 bighas of crops.

"The force of the wind flattened the young paddy stalks. I got half the yield compared to the year before, and it was so little it was barely enough to feed my family," he said.

ACUTE WATERLOGGING

The floods struck when the pandemic was at its most intense, and as rising death tolls dominated the headlines,

the farmers of the country waited for sunnier skies.

In fact, even at the end of the year, farmers in pockets of the country were saying that their lands were still too soggy to sustain life.

Abul Kashem, a farmer in Boda union of Panchagarh described how he is still waiting for his land to dry.

"The low-lying land is too waterlogged to grow anything. Even two months ago, we had knee-deep water for around 15 continuous days... that was when the paddy was just beginning to ripen, and the vegetable seeds were just beginning to sprout," he said.

He was talking about the surprise floods that swept across the north between September and October.

In the beginning of September, the FFWC put out a special report on heavy rainfall in neighbouring Indian states of Assam and Meghalaya. It forecast that the Jamuna river could reach the danger level by September 11 and several areas of the north and northwest would see short-term floods the rest of the month.

"To evaluate the impact of flooding, we need to look at crossing the danger level as well as waterlogging as a function of space [location] and time," said Professor Shafiqul Islam, director of the water diplomacy programme at Tufts University in the USA.

Farmers continue to deal with the aftereffects of late floods -- waters receding slowly, even though the rivers are no longer swelling past the danger point.

Beginning in the monsoon season, Kashem's land was flooded three times last year. He estimated that he only got two to three maunds of rice per bigha, where in the year before he got 12-13 maunds per bigha.

"The paddy was absolutely infested with pests. I had to spray the stalks thrice, when usually once is enough," said Kashem.

Tofazzel Hossain, a sharecropping farmer from Chakoler Beel area in Natore's Gurudaspur upazila, faced a similar predicament early last month.

## Moments of despair, times of uncertainty

FROM PAGE 1

The average monthly household expenditure of migrant workers' families dropped from Tk 17,000 to Tk 7,300 due to the pandemic, a Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) study, conducted on 200 households, revealed in July.

The virus outbreak in the country in early March 2020 forced the government to suspend air communications with leading labour-receiving countries, including six Gulf countries -- Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, and Oman -- which account for 76.93 percent of Bangladeshi migrants' workplaces.

Around 1.82 lakh workers went abroad till March 2020. Of the host countries, Saudi Arabia employed the highest 1.33 lakh workers, followed by 17,398 workers in Oman, according to Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) data.

Besides, around 85,000 visas and visa papers were in possession of some 320 agencies before the pandemic hit the country, says the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (Baira). With regular flights suspended, the fate of those workers remained uncertain.

The suspension of air communications also meant many migrant workers, who came home on holiday, were stuck here.

Around 1-1.5 lakh expatriates came home between January and March prior to the pandemic, says Brac Migration Programme, citing data of the immigration authorities at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport and the home ministry.

The suspension was extended in phases until June when air communications resumed on a limited scale. However, many workers found their visas and work permits expired by then.

In September, a large number of Saudi Arabia-bound workers

took to the streets for plane tickets and extension of their visas and iqamas (residency permit) after the kingdom resumed international flight operations.

Several thousand workers based in Malaysia and Qatar also took to the streets demanding government steps to ensure their return to their workplaces.

Although intense government engagement eventually solved the problem, it created a backlog in the flight schedule which was easing with the operation of additional flights -- until December 21, when Saudi Arabia put a fresh embargo on air communications, creating further worry for these workers.

REMITTANCE SOARING

Migrant workers' contribution is considered one of the main pillars of the country's economy.

In the 2019-20 fiscal year, the country received \$18.2 billion in remittance sent by migrant workers, said the expatriates' welfare ministry, referring to Bangladesh Bank data.

In the first five months of the current fiscal year, migrant workers remitted around \$10.9 billion -- \$3.1 billion more than the remittance received in the same period of the last fiscal year, it said.

In a report published in this newspaper in October, experts attributed the rise in remittance to the government's two percent cash incentive for remitters.

They also said expatriate Bangladeshis in North America and Europe now send in a robust amount of remittance as interest rates on deposits in those countries have dropped to almost zero in the wake of the ongoing coronavirus-driven economic slump.

Experts, however, warned against complacency and advocated for building on the rising trend of inward remittance flow to achieve a sustainable future growth target in the

sector.

GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

In April, the government announced loan support for migrant workers and a Tk 200 crore special loan fund was created by the Probashi Kalyan Bank, after borrowing the money from the Wage Earners' Welfare Board.

However, the government's initiative largely drew poor response among the returnees, according to rights groups, due to the tough conditions set for getting the loan and lack of awareness about it.

Also, the government created another loan scheme of Tk 500 crore to support returnees' economic reintegration.

The bank disbursed around Tk 18 crore to 443 returnees under the two schemes, Ahmed Munirul Saleheen, secretary of the expatriates' welfare ministry, told the media on December 18.

The government also disbursed around Tk 9.85 crore through various missions for food, cash and medical kits as immediate support to migrant workers at the early stage of the pandemic in host countries.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Migrant rights activists called upon the government to continue its diplomatic efforts to hold on to existing markets and explore new ones.

They said once the international labour market becomes normal, both outbound and returnee migrant workers should be provided with Covid-19 vaccines, once available in the country, to save them from being subject to discrimination.

Shariful Hasan, head of Brac Migration Programme, said it is unlikely the overseas employment situation will regain normalcy anytime soon considering the present global Covid-19 situation.

"So, what we can do by this time is we can prepare ourselves. We can make our people skilled and we can

go for new labour markets," he said.

Shariful said it is also essential to address problems in migration governance in the country, especially lowering migration costs which in Bangladesh is higher compared to that in other labour-sending countries.

Besides, the government needs to ensure tests and quarantine for the returnees, he added.

Syed Saiful Haque, co-chair of Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants, said besides exploring new markets and holding on to existing ones, the government needs to continue diplomatic efforts for visa extension of stranded workers so that once the opportunity arises, they can go back to their workplaces.

He said migrant workers have been treated as a "medium of Covid-19 transmission" in some host countries.

"So, vaccination for outbound workers should be ensured so that they do not face discrimination and xenophobia abroad," he added.

Also, vaccines should be provided to returnee migrants and the government has to monitor the vaccination process, he said, adding that the United Nations also put importance on ensuring vaccines for migrants.

Expatriates' Welfare Minister Imran Ahmad, in a statement on December 18, said, "Amid the coronavirus pandemic situation, the ministry has prioritised creating skilled workers as per demand of global labour market in post-coronavirus situation, alongside overall protection including socio-economic reintegration of the migrant workers and their family members at home and abroad, holding on existing labour markets, exploring new markets, and reopening the closed ones."

The statement was made during a press conference marking International Migrants Day on December 18.