

BANGLADESH UPDATE



835
New cases in 24hrs



5,16,019
Total cases



7,626
Deaths



4,60,598
Recoveries



1,847,708
Deaths



85,239,963
Total cases

Give utmost priority to people's rights

PM tells police

Bss, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday asked police personnel to stop cybercrimes alongside money laundering, human trafficking, terrorism, militancy, abuse of drugs, gangster culture and repression on women and children.

"The most important thing is that the trend of crimes is changing with the advent of newer technologies as it is an era of technology. Cybercrimes are increasing drastically and we have to prevent it," she said.

While virtually addressing the passing-out parade of the 37th BCS batch of assistant superintendents of police (ASPs) from her official residence Gono Bhaban, the prime minister also said that the crimes which are being committed using technology must be stopped.

Bangladesh Police organised the programme at the Bangladesh Police Academy, Rajshahi.

The premier called upon the police personnel to always serve the people with honesty, dedication, moral values and discipline and thus achieve the trust, confidence and love of the people.

"In case of discharging professional duties, the police personnel have to give utmost priority to the people's



fundamental rights, human rights and the rule of law," she said.

Noting that money laundering, cybercrime and human trafficking have global phenomenon, Sheikh Hasina said, adding, "We have to protect our country from the menaces."

The premier praised Bangladesh Police for playing a significant role in controlling militancy and terrorism in the country, saying, "Police have to play a stronger role in curbing militancy and terrorism alongside stopping the abuse of drugs. Many police personnel have sacrificed their lives for the noble cause."

She asked the police personnel to prevent the repression on women and children with more efficiency alongside stopping other social crimes such as spreading rumours and gangster culture.

"We have to bring to normal life the teenagers who are involved in crimes using various apps," she said.

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan and Senior Secretary of Public Security Division Mostofa Kamal Uddin also spoke on the occasion while Inspector General of Police (IGP) Benazir Ahmed gave a welcome address at the function.

Finding happiness

RATION FOR REFUGEE FAMILIES AT BHASAN CHAR PER MONTH

ITEMS	1-3 MEMBER	4-6 MEMBER	7-10 MEMBER
Rice	30 kg	50 kg	80 kg
Lentil	3 kg	5 kg	8 kg
Oil	3 litres	5 litres	8 litres
Salt	1 kg	2 kg	3 kg
Sugar	2 kg	3 kg	5 kg
Onion	2 kg	4 kg	6 kg
Egg	30 pieces	50 pieces	72 pieces
Chicken	1	2	3
LPG cylinder	1	1	1

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the Refugee, Relief and Repatriation Commissioner's office to move to Bhasan Char.

Since the arrival of the first group, the refugees have started getting used to living on the island and setting up small endeavours -- such as small shops inside the housing area to sell snacks, clothes, betel-nut, cosmetics and other products.

This correspondent observed on his third visit to the camp, on December 30, the brand-new housing area now has multiple shops set up in an unplanned manner. Many of the shopkeepers said they set up shops without any prior permission from the authorities concerned.

Abdul Hakim runs a small restaurant in the housing area. He sells rice, curry, tea, snacks, and cigarettes.

"Sales are good. I sell goods worth around Tk 5,000-6,000 each day," he said, adding that he sources the items from the Bangladeshi-owned shops at Bhasan Char.

"I gave orders to them and they supplied me accordingly. As Rohingyas cannot move everywhere [outside the housing project], they sell to us."

There is a temporary kitchen market where Bangladeshis sell vegetables, meat, chicken and other grocery items to the Rohingyas.

Many refugees said they are happy with the facilities provided here by the Bangladesh government and that they don't want to go back to the cramped tarpaulin-made houses in the camps in Cox's Bazar.

They also cited better law and order, no security concerns at night, and no need to carry water from a distance, compared to the camps in Cox's Bazar.

But some refugees complained that there is a shortage of cylinder gas as one cylinder for each family per month is not enough.

"We got everything. If we get more cylinders, then there will be no problem in cooking," said Sanjida Khatun. She added they can now even walk together with neighbours at night.

However, the refugees said they want opportunities to work so that they can bear additional expenses.

Staples such as rice, oil, dal, spices and other food items are provided to the refugees by 22 non-government organisations.

SIGNS OF LIFE EMERGE

In the morning, around 10-12 people were seen fishing in the Meghna estuary that encircles the island.

One of these men was Md Rafique. He said when he was back in his village in Myanmar, he used to fish in the river but after arriving in Bangladesh, he has not yet gotten a chance to fish.

"Now, I have the chance to fish. If the authorities allow us to fish in the sea, we will be very happy. We can earn our livelihood," he said.

This seems unlikely, however, as in Cox's Bazar, several groups of Rohingyas were caught and sent back several times when they were heading towards Malaysia on wooden fishing boats and trawlers. Even now, a total of 306 Rohingyas who attempted to travel to Malaysia are currently at Bhasan Char.

This correspondent observed men and women in the housing area busy setting up and participating in livelihood and leisure activities. A music club and a sporting club was opened in the camp area for the recreation of teenagers and young adults.

In the afternoon, two teams of refugees were playing football while another group was playing volleyball. Some people were seen singing songs, accompanied by the harmonium and tabla.

Officials said it is now extremely important to arrange education for kids, jobs for men and some income-generating activities for women so that they can see a future here, otherwise they would be frustrated.

Officials of the ministries of education, health and family planning, agriculture and forest have visited the island.

"The Rohingyas are happy now. The sooner we can arrange livelihoods for them, the better it will be to manage. At least education can be started for kids and women can be given sewing machines," said Commodore AA Mamun Chowdhury, director of the Ashrayan-3 Project (the official name of the Bhasan Char project).

Nigeria arrests journo, opposition leader Sowore

AFP, Abuja

Nigerian authorities have arrested five activists who were organising an anti-government protest, severely beating the most prominent of them Omoyele Sowore, his lawyer said Saturday.

Sowore's lawyer Femi Falana demanded his client's immediate release following the arrests in the capital Abuja overnight December 31, adding that he had been placed

in a dangerous section of a notorious prison.

The police officers who arrested Sowore, who is also a journalist, "subjected him to severe beating and left him with bruises all over his body," Falana told AFP.

"As if that was not enough he has been locked up in the midst of armed robbery suspects at a notorious detention facility called 'abattoir'," the lawyer said.



Shop owners of the demolished Fulbaria market in the capital's Gulistan now selling goods on the street in the place where the market used to be.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Heartbreaks in heartland

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all was well until the outbreak of Covid-19.

In the first two months of shutdown, his family lived on small savings. But as the savings ran out, he stopped paying house rent and took loans to meet living expenses.

In the face of mounting pressure from lenders, Rahim sold a small piece of land in his village home in Gaibandha in September for Tk 4 lakh, with which he cleared the house rent and repaid the lion's share of the loan.

With all the money spent and no other options left, he packed up and vacated the house on November 30, selling out the benches, tables, and chairs. He went to Gaibandha in search of work while his wife and daughter moved to her brother's house in Gazipur.

"I've never imagined such hard-pressed days life would offer. I don't know what the future holds for us, but all I can say is that I don't have the capacity to restart the coaching centre," said Rahim, in a choked voice.

Rahim's story is the bewildering reality for thousands of people in Bangladesh who either lost work opportunities overnight or saw their earnings drop drastically in the pandemic-induced economic downturn.

Although restrictions were lifted gradually and economic activities started picking up, the much-aspired rhythm is still awaited with no one knowing for sure when it will return.

According to a planning ministry report released in August last year, the number of ultra-poor rose from 10.5 percent of the population to 20.5 percent as of June.

It said poverty increased from 20.5 percent to 29.4 percent as a considerable number of people lost their income due to the Covid-19 fallout.

Due to Covid-19, dependency of a large number of these affected people shifted from savings to loans and grocery credit to meet food needs.

A Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) survey on the impacts of the pandemic on livelihoods released in September said 46.22 percent households had savings wiped out and 11.26 percent either sold property or mortgaged them.

Adding to their woes, prices of essential food items namely rice, onions, potatoes and vegetables soared. Prices of the coarse rice consumed mainly by low-income and budget-conscious families rose by 45 percent to Tk 45-47 per kg in Dhaka city on December 31, from Tk 30-34 a year back, data by the Department of Agricultural Marketing showed.

But behind these economic stats, there are personal stories of loss, pain, isolation, frustration, tearful despair, unemployment, hunger, homelessness and renewed struggle.

The human toll aside, the pandemic cast a spotlight on the country's inequality with well-heeled citizens able to hibernate safely at home while watching the exodus of a large number of poor and low-income people.

These people left the city and sought refuge in villages because of the income loss, deepening burden of house rent, utility expenditures, and ever-increasing prices of essentials.

Some of those have and will come back. But, for many, a return is uncertain. For now, at least, falling incomes and the high cost of living have made it impossible to stay in the capital city.

Dalim Fakir is one of them. A manager of a tours and travel agency, he left Dhaka for his Bagerhat

home in late July after the branch of the agency was closed down in the absence of business. He had four month's unpaid house rent in Dhaka when he left.

But the turnaround attempts that the breadwinner of a four-member family made after his return also failed.

Initially, he tried to do business of supplying garments to stores in the district town. But as operators of clothing shops there buy apparel on credit, Dalim found his capital blocked amid sluggish recovery.

He then tried to market tea among tea vendors, only to find that businesses which sell tea had slashed buying prices -- making it just equal to his purchase prices of the leaf.

Dalim had to surrender. By this time, all his capital -- which was nearly Tk 50,000 when he returned home -- was almost finished. And the support from his relatives also stopped.

"I am planning to come back to Dhaka to give a try again. But I have no capital to start anything," said a frustrated Dalim.

While Dalim is planning to start all over again, Md Selim has been trying his luck in a completely different arena.

Every morning, the 42-year-old calls out to people to take breakfast in a makeshift small shop that sells tea and snacks on the footpath in the West Karwan Bazar area.

After working as an assistant accountant at a mega shopping complex for 14 years, he one day found himself in the list of job cuts during the shutdown.

"I was devastated initially," said Selim, who provides for a five-member family.

After trying various things for a few months, he invested a portion of the benefits he got after losing his job in this footpath stall, targeting customers who are mainly on the lower rung of society.

"It's been over two months, but I haven't got any profit from my venture as almost all my earnings go towards paying rent and buying materials," he said.

Apart from monthly Tk 6,000 rent, he pays a lump-sum amount to his assistant.

"Life is and will not be the same again. But I have to strive for my family," he said.

But for workers in the informal sector, the situation has been dire. For them, the pandemic meant no job and no unemployment benefits or other protection. They could hardly have any savings.

So, before the pandemic it was a daily battle, yet Rubiya Begum and her eldest sister Sufia Begum would together earn around Tk 7,000 per month as domestic help in the Bhasantek area of the capital.

Abandoned by her husband long ago, Rubiya started living in one room in Bhasantek slum with her sister and their nephew, Sajib, whom she was raising after his mother's death seven years ago.

She would work in three different households while Sufia worked in one. With the leftovers they used to go from house-owners, things were going well.

But the coronavirus shattered everything. Although she got food assistance in April and May from the government and charity organisations, that too stopped in June. She stopped paying the monthly rent -- Tk 1,800 -- for five months.

"We were being rendered jobless and utterly helpless. We did not get enough to eat," said Rubiya, who hails from Kishoreganj.

With no options left, she had to take

loans.

As things started to get back to normalcy, she managed to work in two households in September, albeit part-time. She is now earning Tk 2,500 a month. Sufia, however, could not join her work yet.

Rubiya said Sajib used to study in a local madrasa before the pandemic, but two months ago she got him a job in a tailoring shop where he gets Tk 2,000.

"Sajib's mother wanted her son to study. But how could we do that when we're struggling to make ends meet?" she said.

Her story is the same as thousands of workers, especially women, in the informal economy. Low-income groups including day labourers and rickshaw pullers were badly affected as they instantly became jobless due to the nationwide shutdown.

Although the stimulus packages announced by the government to absorb the economic shock, enormously supported export-oriented and big industries, a large number of low-income people and informal labourers were left behind.

More than 60 percent of the poor and low-income population who suffered income losses in this crisis did not receive any support from the public and private sectors, according to a recent study.

The study conducted jointly by Power and Participation Research Centre and Brac Institute for Governance and Development said only 39 percent of households got some assistance between April and June, but it amounted to 4 percent of their lost income.

A recent World Bank report said around 68 percent of the people who had to stop working in urban areas of Dhaka and Chattogram due to the pandemic have lost their jobs.

Slum areas witnessed higher -- 71 percent -- job losses than non-slum areas where it was 61 percent, said the report, titled "Losing Livelihoods: The labour market impacts of Covid-19 in Bangladesh".

There were some steps to provide cash and food to the needy through government and private initiatives, but that was insignificant considering the extent of havoc Covid wreaked on lives and livelihoods.

Mohammad Yeasin can be considered luckier as he at least did not lose his job.

But the decorator business employee did not earn a single taka in over two months of shutdown that suspended all social gatherings and ceremonies. Even with the restrictions eased, the 38-year-old saw his earnings fall to almost nothing.

"I was poor. But now I am poorer than ever," said Yeasin, who lives with his five-member family on the city outskirts at Hemayetpur.

Before the pandemic, he said, he would work for three to four days a week. Working each day would fetch him Tk 800 apart from the tips and free food at the ceremonies.

But now he can work twice a week and sometimes only once, making it difficult to earn a living, said Yeasin, who hails from Barishal. He said his wife took loans worth around Tk 1 lakh from her village, but now they cannot pay the instalments.

"On one hand, there's pressure from lenders and there is quarrels and mental agony on the other," he said.

"We can't carry on like this. If things don't improve, we may have to go to our village home," he added, in a voice tinged with sadness and helplessness.

*his real name withheld on request

Target next year

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After the last span was installed on December 10 last year, Cabinet Secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam, who served as Bridge Division Secretary for eight years, said the bridge would be open by June, 2022.

METRO RAIL

The overall physical progress of the MRT line-6, the first-ever metro rail project in the country, was 53.58 percent till November last year.

The first phase -- Uttara to Agargaon -- saw 77.57 percent progress and the second phase -- Agargaon to Motijheel -- 47.49 percent progress, according to the project documents.

The 20.10km line, which will connect Uttara with Motijheel by an elevated track, is being set up at a cost of Tk 22,000 crore. Once in operation, it will carry 60,000 passengers per hour and reduce travel time to 36 minutes from at least two hours.

Initially, its implementation period was 2012-2024.

But Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had directed that the line from Uttara to Agargaon be made operational by 2019 and that from Agargaon to Motijheel by 2020.

Failing to achieve the target, the authorities in May 2019 announced that "early commissioning" of the project would be made on December 16 this year, when the country celebrates the golden jubilee of its independence.

Asked about this, Quader said, "I will extend the deadline a little bit... we will open all four projects, including the Metro Rail, by June next year."

BANGABANDHU TUNNEL

The project witnessed 62 percent progress till December last year.

The boring of the first tube has already been completed. And Quader on December 12 last year inaugurated the boring of the second tube.

The 9.1km-long tunnel, the first of its kind in South Asia, is being built at a cost of Tk 10,400 crore. It will help develop a modern communication system between Dhaka, Chattogram and Cox's Bazar, and also be linked to the Asian Highway.

Bridges Division Secretary Belayet Hossain, also executive director of Bangladesh Bridge Authority which is implementing the project, said the deadline for finishing the project is December next year.

"However, we are hopeful about opening the tunnel before the deadline," he told this newspaper last night.

ELEVATED EXPRESSWAY

After years of sluggishness, the work of the first Dhaka Elevated Expressway has gained momentum, as the problem of funding the much-anticipated project was solved early last year.

The project is being implemented under public-private partnership model.

Bangladesh Bridge Authority signed a Tk 8,703 crore deal with Italian-Thai Development Public Company in January 2011 to build the 47km expressway, with 19,73km main line from Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport to Kutubkhali.

The deal was revised and signed again in December 2013, with the cost revised at Tk 8,940 crore. Several changes were made in the design.

Besides, the government has to spend Tk 4,885 crore on land acquisition, resettlement and relocation of utility service lines, raising the total cost of the project to Tk 13,825 crore.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Project Director AHMS Aktar said they expect to complete the work of the stretch from the Dhaka airport to Tejgaon rail gate by December this year.

"We will then start partial operation," he said, adding that the work of the entire project would be completed by June 2023.

The project witnessed 22 percent progress till December, added Aktar.

Vehicles have to pay toll to use the elevated expressway, which will allow those to avoid the city's traffic jam.

EU denounces conditions for migrants in Bosnia

AFP, Sarajevo

The living conditions of hundreds of homeless migrants in Bosnia, bordering the European Union, are "completely unacceptable", EU envoy Johann Sattler said Saturday.

The migrants have been left homeless in freezing and rainy conditions since their camp near the northwestern town of Bihac burned down last month.

"The situation is completely unacceptable," said Sattler, the EU's Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"Lives and basic human rights of many hundreds of people are seriously jeopardised," he added after a meeting with Bosnia's Security Minister Selmo Cikotic.

Fire engulfed the Lipa migrant centre in northwestern Bosnia on December 23. There were no casualties from the blaze but much of the infrastructure of the site was destroyed.

The incident deepened the crisis over where to house thousands of migrants, as Bosnian authorities failed to find new accommodation for the newly homeless.

India approves two vaccines

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United States, has recorded the most infections of the coronavirus disease.

It is now expected to start a massive immunisation programme within about a week, a government official said, and hopes to inoculate 300 million of its 1.35 billion people free of charge in the first six to eight months of this year.

The AstraZeneca/Oxford shot, already approved in Britain, Argentina and El Salvador, will take the lead and Bharat Biotech's COVAXIN will be administered under stricter conditions given no efficacy data has been released for it.

"It's now time to reap the benefits of the robust supply chain infrastructure we've put in place for quick and equitable distribution of the vaccine," said Harsh Vardhan, the health minister of India, which is the world's biggest vaccine producer and exporter.

"Urge all citizens to entrust the stringent protocols followed for ensuring safety, efficacy and immunogenicity of the approved vaccines."

Drugs Controller General of India V G Somani said the overall efficacy of the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine was 70.42%, while Bharat Biotech's

COVAXIN was "safe and provides a robust immune response".

The British-developed AstraZeneca/Oxford shot is being made locally by the Serum Institute of India (SII) and will be branded COVISHIELD, while Bharat Biotech has teamed up with the government-run Indian Council of Medical Research.

A lawmaker from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's nationalist party had earlier complained about the apparent preference for the foreign-made vaccine instead of the local one, whose approval has also raised questions about a lack of transparency in the process.