

BANGLADESH UPDATE

978 New cases in 24hrs

5,18,898 Total cases

7,687 Deaths

4,63,480 Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

1,880,985 Deaths

87,074,877 Total cases

HOME GROWN COVID VACCINE

Globe Biotech gets nod for trial

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Globe Biotech has got the licence to produce its homegrown coronavirus vaccine for human trial.

"We received the licence on December 28," Mohiuddin, manager of quality and regulation at Globe Biotech Ltd, told The Daily Star yesterday.

A research organisation may apply for permission to the Bangladesh Medical and Research Council (BMRC) to start the first phase of clinical trials next week.

On October 1, the Globe Biotech Ltd cancelled a contract with the icddr and assigned Dhaka-based Clinical Research Organization to hold the trials.

On October 5, Globe Biotech announced that its first vaccine candidate had passed in the pre-clinical trial on mice.

On October 17, Bancovid, along with two other vaccine candidates developed by the Globe Biotech Ltd, were included in the draft landscape of the World Health Organization (WHO).

An official of the drug administration, wishing not to be named, said Globe was given permission for doing research and product development.

DAILY UPDATE

Seventeen people have died from Covid-19 in the 24 hours preceding 8:00am yesterday, according to a press release issued by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

The total number of deaths has now reached 7,687 and the death rate stands at 1.48 percent.

At least 978 new infections were recorded in the meantime, taking the total number of people infected to 5,18,898, added the release.

The current positivity rate is 6.29 percent while the total positivity rate stands at 15.71 percent.

Yesterday's numbers were announced after testing 15,544 samples across the country.

At least 1,021 Covid-19 patients have recovered in the 24-hour period.

The total number of recoveries now stands at 4,63,480 and the recovery rate at 89.32 percent.

Among the 17 deceased, 15 were men and two were women.

One of them was aged between 31 and 40 years, two were between 41 and 50, three between 51 and 60, and 11 above 60, added the release.

COVID VACCINE IN INDIA

Delays over pricing hold back rollout

NDTV ONLINE

As major countries like the US and China race to vaccinate their populations with rapidly approved shots, tens of millions of doses prepared for India are sitting in storage despite having been authorised for use.

While distribution in other nations started soon after approval with pricing deals signed ahead of time, New Delhi and Serum Institute of India Ltd. -- the world's biggest vaccine maker by volume and AstraZeneca Plc's local partner -- have engaged in months of haggling behind closed doors and are yet to sign a formal supply agreement.

That has left at least 70 million vaccine doses in limbo despite the urgent need in a country facing the world's second-largest outbreak.

On Sunday, Serum's billionaire Chief Executive Officer Adar Poonawalla said Indian officials have "orally" agreed to buy 100 million doses at a "special price" of 200 rupees (\$2.74) a shot, below the about \$4 to \$5 price tag given to the UK government. The company then wants to sell vaccines privately to individuals and companies at a marked-up cost of 1,000 rupees within two to three months.

The government may be looking to put pressure on Serum to lower its prices, as seen by its controversial

decision to greenlight a rival vaccine developed by a local company that's still recruiting volunteers for final-stage testing, according to Abhishek Sharma, an analyst at Jefferies.

The standoff has cost precious time in a country where infections have crossed the 10 million mark, and reflects the tension between public interest and private profiteering from pharmaceutical companies that want to recoup their pandemic investments quickly.

While richer, developed economies have mostly avoided pricing disputes in their roll-outs so far, the issue of how much inoculations should cost amid a pandemic that's killing more than 10,000 people each day globally is likely to loom larger as distribution extends to the developing world.

For Prime Minister Narendra Modi, each cent spent on the price of a vaccine in a nation home to more than 1.3 billion people will have serious financial consequences for his administration. "When you are buying in bulk, there is obviously the advantage of being able to negotiate the price," Randeep Guleria, a member of PM Modi's taskforce for Covid-19 management and the director of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, said in an interview on Monday.

Quader's brother

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"I will not abandon the political ideologies of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman even if I am expelled from the party," he said.

Mirza's remarks have put the AL top brass in an embarrassing situation and led to questions about the reasons for making such comments. Cashing in on the situation, BNP leaders said Mirza's remarks proved that the government has been deceiving people, using the Election Commission.

Asked about his brother's remarks, Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader said no one except Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is essential for the party.

"There is no scope for sparing anyone under special consideration. The party chief can make any decision over violation of party discipline," he told journalists at a programme in the capital without mentioning his brother's name.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Mirza said, "In most cases, elections are marred by irregularities. These are local issues, not national ones. Those who have muscle power and money are doing this."

"But I want to set an example of fair election. The current government led by Sheikh Hasina is trying to restore democracy. We all should cooperate with her."

In reply to a query, Mirza said he was receiving death threats from unidentified

mobile numbers and fake IDs.

"A conspiracy is on to kill me," he claimed, adding that all the conspirators are involved in AL politics.

He also said he wasn't facing any pressure from the party high-ups.

Earlier in a press release on Tuesday, he claimed that his statements were presented partially in the media.

At different programmes on Thursday and Sunday, he alleged that some party leaders were hatching a conspiracy to make sure that he loses the upcoming Basurhat municipality polls.

Two lawmakers -- one in Noakhali and another in Feni --, a mayoral candidate in Feni municipality, a former chairman of Companyganj upazila parishad and a banker are the masterminds behind the conspiracy, he alleged.

He also demanded reconstitution of the district AL committee, impartial investigation into Ekram killing in Feni and an end to tender manipulation by "AL men".

Mirza also alleged that many local AL leaders are involved in misdeeds such as tender manipulation and awarding jobs in exchange for money. And they are now emerging as big leaders.

Popularity of no AL leaders, except for Sheikh Hasina, has seen a rise, he mentioned.

On Sunday, Mirza, along with his supporters, blocked the zero point area in Basurhat and staged demonstration. His supporters set fire to tyres there.

Man killed in Cox's Bazar

FROM PAGE 1

armed criminals, including Khorshed Alam, attacked police barricading the road and tried to snatch Shamsul.

In self-defence, police also shot fires triggering the "gunfight", he said, adding that police later came to know that Khorshed was wounded on the spot and declared dead by doctors when he was rushed to Teknaf Upazila Health Complex.

Police abled to take Shamsul to the police station when the criminals managed to flee from the scene. Three of their police personnel received injuries during the "gunfight", the police officer claimed.

Shaheen Alam, a brother of the dead, however, said on Tuesday night Khorshed and some other youths were playing badminton at Mithapanirchara Bazar.

In the meantime, some people were taking their eldest brother Shamsul

boarding on a CNG run auto-rickshaw toward Teknaf picking him up from their house, Shaheen said.

Bullets were fired from the CNG when some people put barricade on the way at Mithapanirchara Bazar and tried to snatch Shamsul, he said.

Then the CNG went away immediately with their brother, Shaheen said.

The body was handed over to police after postmortem, said Shaheen Mohammad Abdur Rahman Chowdhury, residential medical officer (RMO) of Cox's Bazar General Hospital.

The injured police personnel -- ASI Ratan Mia, constables Shafiqul and Balam Das -- were undergoing treatment at Teknaf Upazila Health Complex, the SP said.

Two cases are under process in this connection, police said, adding Khorshed was also an accused of eight cases.



This commemorative stamp saying, "73rd founding anniversary of the East Pakistan Muslim Chhatra League", have outraged many former Chhatra League leaders and activists as well as academics who pointed out that it was illogical to mention East Pakistan in the title.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Unauthorised, uncontrolled

FROM PAGE 1

Prof Dr Sultana Shahana Banu, head of the virology department of Dhaka Medical College, said the use of low-quality medical equipment and masks are one of the prime reasons behind the rising number of infected cases in the country.

"Wearing these fake masks, people move around and feel a false sense of security, and that makes them susceptible to the virus."

She said the use of face masks, as an effective gear to prevent community transmission of Covid-19, increased considerably after the government announced a strictly enforced "no mask, no service" policy at public and private offices on November 2.

According to people involved in the business, surgical masks account for nearly 90 percent of the demand while other non-medical fabric masks make up the remaining 10 percent.

Authorised mask producers alleged that unhygienic production of surgical masks has put the sector at stake as the high-quality products of factories maintaining health safety measures cannot compete with the cheap low-quality masks.

"People now only look for cheap masks -- on buses, footpaths, or on the streets. They don't want to know about quality and hygiene," said Mokarram Hossain Sazzad, executive member of the Disposable Mask Association.

He said a surgical face mask was sold at Tk 10 in June-July last year. "Now, people are buying four for Tk 10."

He said the production cost per thousand masks at his factory was around Tk 1,350, but producers of low-quality masks were selling a thousand masks at only Tk 1,100.

"It's a medical product. There is no way to produce it with low-grade non-woven fabric and in an unhygienic environment," said the young businessman, adding that production at his factory has drastically fallen from one lakh to 40,000 per day now.

He claimed that he has obtained an NOC (no objection certificate) from the DGDA for producing surgical face masks.

"But there are at least 50 factories in Kamrangirchar, 20 in Keraniganj, and many others in Narayanganj and Chattogram which are not registered and don't follow any safety measures."

He said the non-woven material for surgical masks was mostly imported from China. Small factories too are now producing these masks in bulk.

MEDICAL VS NON-MEDICAL Masks used for preventing infection are classified into two types -- medical and

non-medical. Cloth or fabric masks are considered non-medical while all other masks -- from surgical to respiratory -- are considered medical.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), use of a cloth mask in a community setting is enough to stay safe from Covid-19 infection while medical masks are mandatory in a hospital setting, based on the environment.

A surgical mask is a loose-fitting, disposable device that creates a physical barrier between the mouth and nose of the wearer and potential contaminants in the immediate environment, according to the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

A surgical face mask is mainly composed of three layers of non-woven fabric. On the other hand, a cloth mask is made of different weight or gsm (gram per square metre) of fabrics.

The DGDA has set out different specifications and quality control guidelines for both fabric and medical masks.

It laid out the details from materials to be used, to construction, packaging, marking and warnings to be labelled on the boxes of the face masks.

Experts say the quality of a face mask differs considering their efficiency in filtering airborne particles measuring up to 0.3microns, breathability, and fit.

In the marking section, the DGDA guideline said a face mask to be placed on the market should have information on 13 points clearly written in English and Bangla on the package -- including the producer's name, trademark, address, batch number, filtration efficiency, and wearing and disposable instructions.

Prof Be-Nazir Ahmed, former director (disease control) of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), said a surgical mask is single-use. Its disposal is another problem as it is difficult for common people to correctly dispose of it.

"General people should wear a three-layer fine cotton mask, not the surgical mask. It can be used repeatedly."

He said locally made surgical masks may not protect the wearer if quality is not ensured. "It can even spread the disease rather than containing it," he added.

GROUND REALITY Low-quality masks produced in unhygienic places are now being sold everywhere on the streets.

In Babubazar, the largest wholesale mask market in the country, masks are being sold in an open place without packaging. There are at least 150

wholesalers in the market, from where masks go out to every corner of the country.

The wholesale buyers buy packets and boxes separately without any details of the manufacturer to sell in retail as seen by a reporter of this newspaper during a visit last week.

Traders said there are at least 10 types of masks of varying prices and quality being sold at Babubazar.

Other than two types which are imported, the rest are locally made. The masks available are non-woven surgical masks, melt blown fabric masks, Ninja masks, woven, knit and sweater fabric masks.

The traders also claimed they sell high-quality imported respiratory masks like the KN95 and N95.

Azad Rahman, who has been involved in the business in Babubazar since March, said he sells 1,00,000 masks every day.

Most of them -- around 90 percent, he estimated -- are surgical masks, adding that it was cheaper compared to other face masks.

"There is very limited profit. I bought masks for Tk 1,150 per thousand and sold it for Tk 1,200. If I give a packet, it would cost another Tk 3.50 per 50 pieces," Azad said.

It's tough to maintain health measures here on the footpath, he added.

NO DGDA AUTHORISATION DGDA officials said they have given permission (NOC) to 23 companies across the country to produce surgical masks.

"We gave permission to local manufacturers after checking their quality control is maintained. The guidelines have been uploaded on the DGDA website. However, many factories are doing this illegally," Ayub Hossain, director of DGDA, told this newspaper.

He said they are often conducting drives and taking action against illegal mask producers and traders to control the risk of low-quality and sub-standard medical products in local markets.

"Surgical masks -- as a protective gear -- are easy to use and they are produced in large quantities. But we are authorising surgical masks [only] for medical purposes," he said.

"As a regulatory authority, we are just issuing permission [for production]. We have no use-specific guideline; those who are working on [public] health issues can suggest it," Ayub added.

Mohammad Shamsuddin, a deputy director at DGDA, said they have fined three companies in November for producing and marketing unauthorised face masks.

Take legal action against importers

FROM PAGE 1

Six arms dealers have imported 91 Uzi pistols since 2014 after declaring them rifles. Forty-nine of the weapons have been sold to different licensed arms holders.

The arms holders include members of parliament, ruling party leaders, businessmen, and retired members of law enforcement agencies, said police and arms importers.

In the letter, the PHQ also requested the home ministry to declare forfeit all arms like the Uzi which have been imported, stocked and sold taking advantage of any loophole in the law.

The PHQ sent the letter to the ministry after receiving an investigation report from the Detective Branch (DB) of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police in October. The detectives launched the investigation after they recovered an Uzi from the possession of a drug dealer -- Minal Sharif -- on August 20 in the capital.

In the wake of the DB investigation, the PHQ sent an eight-point recommendation, including taking

lawful action against arms importers, to the home ministry.

It recommended ensuring mandatory presence of an arms expert team from the police and the army during the release of arms shipments by the customs. It also pushed for banning import of all automated arms or those which can fire more than one shot at a time.

The PHQ further recommended formulating clear rules and regulations on importing magazines.

Contacted, Md Jahangir Alam, additional secretary (political and ICT) at the home ministry, told The Daily Star yesterday that they had received the letter from the PHQ and that they were working on the issue.

"We are looking into the existing law, investigation findings and the investigation. It might take some time to take any step," he said.

Golam Mostofa Rashel, deputy commissioner of DB police (Tejgaon Division), said they were investigating to know what the users were doing with the sophisticated weapon.

'NOT VIOLATING ANY LAW'

Since the issue of importing and selling Uzi pistols came to light, several arms dealers have been claiming that they did not violate any law.

In separate clarifications, three licenced arms dealers -- MH Arms Co, Shafiqul Islam Arms & Co, and Ahmed Hossain Arms Co -- said the arms manufacturing company makes two models of "rifles" -- one is Uzi SMG with long butt and the other Uzi pistol with a smaller butt.

The company uses "the pistol tag" for the identification of the rifle model. The tag of a "pistol" does not make a weapon a pistol, they argued.

Talking to this correspondent yesterday, Jalaluddin Sheikh, owner of Shaikh and Company, a legal arms dealer in Bogura, said he bought four "rifles" with tags of "Uzi pistol" from MH Arms Co, an importer, in 2014 and then sold it to four different buyers.

"I sold the firearms knowing that they were rifles ... I am ready to provide any assistance," he said.

Pakistan ghost

FROM PAGE 1

Another former BCL leader, Golam Isteja Chowdhury Moni, wrote, "It's an unforgivable crime."

Asked, postal department acting director general Siraj Uddin said, "A committee decided to unveil 100 commemorative stamps in Mujib Borsho and it is one of them. We issued this with the name of the time of the establishment."

On June 23, last year, the department unveiled a commemorative stamp on the 71st founding anniversary of Bangladesh Awami League. But that stamp didn't mention Bangladesh Awami Muslim League.

About this, Siraj said, "This is Mujib year's stamp where our plan is to focus on Bangabandhu. Bangabandhu himself is the history; we want to focus on how he established what."

Posts and Telecommunications Minister Mustafa Zabbar unveiled the commemorative stamp on January 4 and uploaded a photo of the stamp on social media.

Replying to a comment, he wrote, "postage stamps contain history. Imagine if we write Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman founded Bangladesh Chhatra League on January 4, 1948 -- what truth would you present to your new generation then?"

Nur Hossain gets life term in arms case

Acquitted in extortion case

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Narayanganj

Nur Hossain, an accused in the Narayanganj seven-murder case, has been sentenced to life imprisonment in another case filed under the arms act.

Sabina Yasmin, judge at the Narayanganj Additional District and Sessions Judge's Court, passed the order in presence of the accused at noon yesterday.

The court also acquitted Nur and seven of his cohorts in another case filed for extortion, said Jasmin Ahmed, additional public prosecutor of the district.

The accused were acquitted in the extortion case as the charges could not be proved.

Meanwhile, Narayanganj District and Sessions Judge's Court Judge Anisur Rahman passed an order to start the trial in a corruption case filed against Nur.

The court will record statements of the witnesses to that case on February 18.

Earlier in the day, Nur was taken to court from Kashimpur jail and was taken back to the jail after the verdict announcement.

Police in 2014 filed three cases against Nur under the arms act, while he was also an accused in the Narayanganj seven-murder case and five other cases.

Dhaka, Delhi

FROM PAGE 1

common but the treaty on water sharing was signed only on two rivers -- the Ganges in 1996 and the Feni River in 2019.

During water secretary-level meeting of the two countries in August 2019, two technical committees -- one on conducting feasibility study on the optimum use of water received under the Ganges treaty and the other on data collection of the six rivers -- were formed.

Malik Fida, a member of the technical committee who was present at the meeting, said once the data on water usage by the two countries is shared, they can develop a water sharing framework agreement.

"India has agreed to do it," he told The Daily Star, but could not confirm when the data will be shared.

Apart from this, Bangladesh also proposed a basin-wide river management. That, however, requires sharing of data on environmental flow of the rivers, joint studies, dredging etc. There was no concrete decision on this matter, he said.

Malik Fida said Bangladesh further said it wanted to withdraw 153 cubic water from the Rahimpur Canal for an irrigation project. About this, India said they would need an opinion from West Bengal.

Bangladesh also proposed a joint study on the optimum use of the Ganges water, he said.

Malik Fida said these issues would be discussed at the secretary and ministerial level meetings before finalisation.

Erratum

There were some inadvertent mistakes in the report headlined "Erfan Salim: He gets bail in 2 cases based on police report" in yesterday's front page of The Daily Star. In the first paragraph it was erroneously mentioned that Mohammad Erfan Salim, son of Awami League leader Haji Md Salim, was granted bail in two cases based on a police report. Salim had actually received ad-interim bail in two other cases filed by a mobile court. The bail was not granted based on any police report. He had been imprisoned by the mobile court for six months on October 26, 2020. We regret the error.

More rice import to boost reserve

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The directorate has also been permitted to import another 50,000 tonnes of sun-dried rice from Agropcorp International Pte Ltd of Singapore at a price of \$408.28 per tonne.

Prices of coarse rice, mainly consumed by low-income groups, have soared the most.

The retail price of the coarse grain was Tk 45-50 a kilogramme yesterday, up 46 percent from a year ago, data

from the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) showed.

The price of fine and medium rice also saw a rise between 10 and 20 percent compared to the price on January 6 last year, according to the TCB.

Earlier, Food Secretary Nazmanara Khanum told The Daily Star that the country does not have much shortage of rice against demand and the government is planning for food

intervention keeping the second wave of Covid-19 in mind.

On December 28, the food ministry wrote to the commerce ministry and the National Board of Revenue to take steps to cut the import tariff on rice to 25 percent from 62.5 percent to facilitate the import.

The NBR is reviewing the proposal and will issue a circular in this regard soon, food ministry sources said.