

BANGLADESH
UPDATE

849

New cases in 24hrs



523,302

Total cases



7,803

Deaths



467,718

Recoveries

GLOBAL
UPDATE

1,948,083

Deaths



90,980,141

Total cases

Men in their 30s get Covid most

Study finds

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

Males aged between 30 and 39 constitute the largest share of the Covid-19 patients in Bangladesh, reveals a study.

It also finds a rising trend of the asymptomatic cases in the country as the pandemic continues to rage.

The study was carried out on 1,021 people, who recovered four weeks prior to being interviewed after undergoing treatment at six hospitals. The study period was from April 1 to June 30, 2020.

The paper titled "A multi-centric, cross-sectional study on Covid-19 in Bangladesh: clinical epidemiology and short-term outcomes in recovered individuals" has recently been published in New Microbes and New Infections journal.

The research, conducted by researchers from seven academic and medical organisations in Dhaka, Chattogram and Mymensingh, found that recovered patients suffered from a number of complications, including sleep disturbance, pains and aches, weakened attention span, anxiety and depression, memory loss, and complications with mobility.

It revealed that 75 percent of the patients were males and highest 30 percent of them were aged between 30 and 39.

Dr Mustak Ibn Ayub, a co-author of the paper and a teacher of genetic engineering and biotechnology at Dhaka University, said the study is a great effort on understanding the heterogeneity among Covid patients in Bangladesh. "It shows that asymptomatic cases are on the rise in Bangladesh. It has also answered some questions of the scientists such as whether BCG vaccine has any protective

effects against SARS-cov-2 infection."

The study also found that comorbid patients were more likely to experience mobility problems, weakness and problems in performing regular activities.

It revealed that among different age groups, the 20-39 cohorts showed the highest infection rate and in terms of gender, the prevalence of Covid-19 infection in males was three times more than that in females.

"The majority of the cases [62 percent] reported indirect contact with confirmed cases, whereas 48.5 percent admitted that they frequently went out of their homes before being infected and diagnosed," read the report.

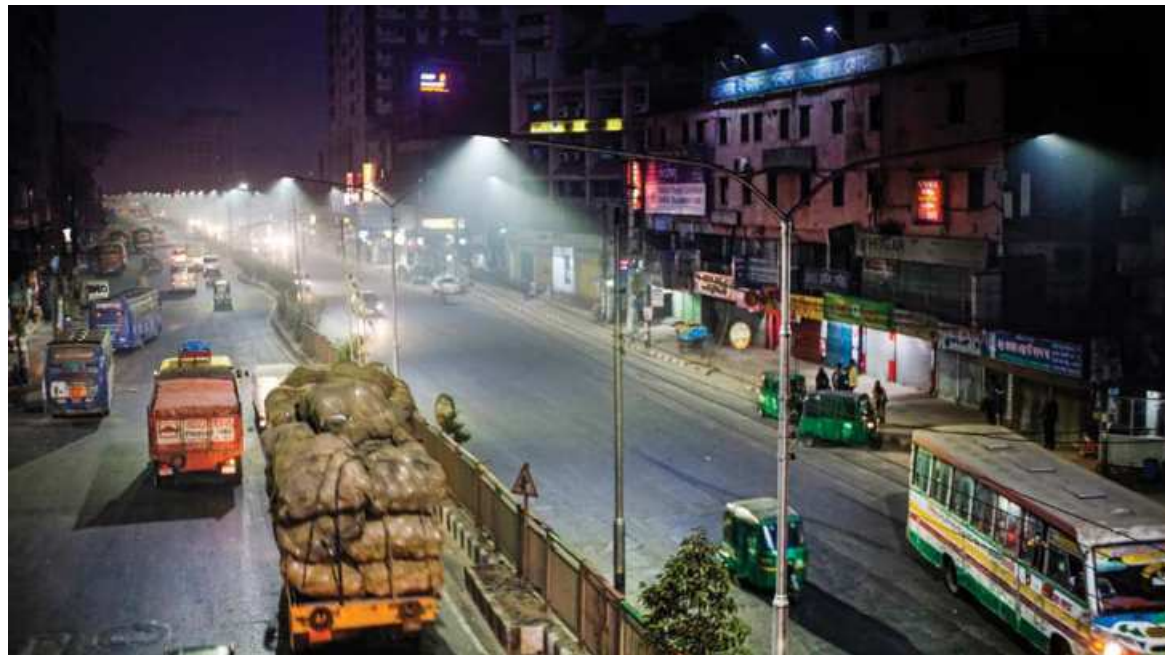
It further showed that 50 percent of the respondents had come into close contact with confirmed cases and 40.6 percent had 341 Covid-19 positive family members.

"So, it can be easily concluded from this data that community transmission is very common in Bangladesh and hence social distancing and other preventive measures should be fully implemented to prevent further deterioration," said the report.

It found that half of the symptomatic novel coronavirus patients were overweight.

Dr Adnan Mannan, lead author of the paper and also a teacher of genetic engineering and biotechnology at Chittagong University, said they did not find any significant relationship between blood groups and chance of getting Covid-19.

He said novel coronavirus infection is prevalent among comorbid patients, especially diabetic, hypertensive and cardiovascular disease patients. Post-Covid complications were also found among asymptomatic patients.



The Dhaka North City Corporation has installed bright and energy-saving LED street lights on different roads in the capital. The photo was taken on Mirpur Road in Shyamoli early yesterday.

PHOTO:
RASHED SHUMON

CAG finds financial anomalies at EC

FROM PAGE 1

of the country on the same day," according to an audit objection letter from the CAG.

EC officials, however, said there was no scope of raising such audit objections. Since the commission is not under any ministry or government division, it does not need to take approval from the finance ministry to pay any "special speakers" or "course advisors".

"Positions like special speakers, course advisor and course director were approved by the commission. The commission itself is empowered to spend allocated money in line with the Election Commission Secretariat Act, 2009," EC Senior Secretary Md Alamgir told this newspaper.

"They [CAG] have asked us either to send an answer or to refund the money. We're preparing the answer. We've already sent letters to the EC offices at the thana, district levels and the ETI, seeking their answers," he said.

He also said, "Some of them have already sent their answers and the commission has approved them ... We will send the answer [to the CAG] this week."

The CAG alleged that EC officials collected more than their allocated allowances while attending training sessions across the country.

There are also allegations that in some cases "special speakers", "course advisors" and others collected training allowances without showing any proof of attendance, apart from their signature on the acquittance roll, EC documents show.

According to the documents, "course directors" collected more than their allowances for the training programme

held at the ETI head office.

The CAG also raised objections about then EC secretary, additional secretary and ETI director general collecting the allowances, according to audit objection letters.

It said the government incurred a loss of Tk 19.76 lakh because the amount was paid in training allowances to unapproved "course advisors" during the training held at the ETI head office. The government faced loss of Tk 12.75 lakh as allowances were paid to unapproved "special speakers", it said.

It also said "course directors" collected Tk 14.93 lakh more than their fixed allowances.

"The audit objections were yet to be resolved," said the working paper of the EC meeting.

ETI officials said that the CAG raised the audit objection in March last year. Following the procedures, ETI officials gave impromptu answers. But CAG officials did not accept their answers. Then, the CAG and ETI officials held a meeting, known as "exit meeting", to settle the objection.

The CAG officials did not accept the answer at the exit meeting as well and asked the ETI officials to refund the money. A tripartite meeting involving EC, CAG and ETI official is now pending to settle the issue.

If the tripartite meeting fails to resolve the issue, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Accounts will have to step in, said ETI officials.

ETI Director General Nuruzzaman Talukdar refused to make any comments on the CAG audit objections.

According to EC sources, the election commission allocated Tk 57.33 crore for training during the last parliamentary polls. And another Tk 59.24 crore was allocated for training for the upazila

elections.

Of the total allocation, Tk 1.04 crore was allotted for giving allowances to "special speakers" ahead of the national election and Tk 47.7 lakh was set aside for "special speakers" ahead of the upazila polls.

DEBATE OVER SPECIAL ALLOWANCE

The audit objection came to light when the EC is facing criticism, including from a section of eminent citizens and left-leaning political parties, for different types of alleged irregularities.

Forty-two eminent citizens on December 14 urged the president to constitute a supreme judicial council to probe allegations of corruption and other misconduct by the EC.

In a letter to President Abdul Hamid, they claimed that members of the EC, under KM Nurul Huda's leadership, had indulged in misconduct and irregularities, including spending Tk 2 crore for delivering speeches as "special speakers" at trainings ahead of the 11th national election and fifth upazila elections.

In reply, Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda on December 24 said the allegation of spending Tk 2 crore on special speakers at training sessions ahead of elections were made on false grounds.

He said the allocation for special speakers for the 11th National Election was Tk 1.04 crore, and for the 5th upazila election, it was Tk 47.70 lakh.

He said according to rules and regulations all expenditures were subject to audit and if the audit objections were not settled, all unspent money will be returned to the public exchequer.

"There is no scope of financial irregularities," he said.

HSC results by Jan 28

FROM PAGE 1

Yesterday, the cabinet also approved the exam results through issuing an ordinance by the end of this week.

"They have already prepared the results. But the existing act - Intermediate and Secondary Education Ordinance-1961 - stipulates that holding exams is mandatory for publication of results."

The meeting was informed that the Jatuya Sangsad was going into a session six days later, Anwarul said. "That's why the cabinet decided to place the matter before parliament."

The 11th session of 11th parliament is scheduled to begin on January 18.

The amendment bill would be placed in the House on the first day of its next session, the cabinet secretary said.

Speaking to journalists after the cabinet meeting, Education Minister Dipu Moni said the draft of the amendment bill would be placed in the House at its winter session.

"Once the amendment is signed into a law [by the president], the government will be able to publish results without holding examinations during any disaster," she said.

The government in October last year decided to cancel the HSC and its equivalent examinations due to health safety concerns amid the pandemic.

Instead, candidates would be evaluated based on their results in Junior School Certificate, Secondary School Certificate and their equivalent examinations.

About 13.65 lakh students were expected to take the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) exams last year.

The results will be published after coordinating 75 percent from the SSC and 25 percent from the JSC-JDC results.

Yesterday, the cabinet also approved the draft of the Civil Courts (Amendment) Bill-2021 to raise the higher threshold of the pecuniary jurisdiction of lower court judges to dispose of the civil cases.

The cabinet secretary said the bill proposes increasing the financial jurisdiction to Tk 15 lakh from Tk 2 lakh for an assistant judge, and that of a senior assistant judge to Tk 25 lakh from Tk 4 lakh for holding trials of civil suits.

The bill also seeks to hike the higher threshold of the pecuniary jurisdiction of a district judge to Tk 5 crore from Tk 5 lakh for hearing appeals of civil suits, he added.

If the proposed law is passed by parliament, an assistant judge would be able to try civil cases having an asset value of maximum Tk 15 lakh each, while a senior assistant judge would hold trials of civil suits having a maximum asset value of Tk 25 lakh each.

Besides, a provision was incorporated in the proposed law to transfer appeals, which are pending with the High Court against the decree or order issued by joint district judges in civil suits involving a maximum asset value of Tk 5 crore, to district judge courts.

The cabinet also approved a bill in principle to set up Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University in Pirojpur.

It ratified the Preferential Trade Agreement, signed between Bangladesh and Bhutan on December 6 last year, to boost bilateral trade between the two countries.

The cabinet cancelled its previous decision made on July 29, 2013, over increasing the number of trawlers in the exclusive economic zone in the Bay of Bengal.

Vaccination starts

FROM PAGE 1

Each WIC store can accommodate up to 4.25 lakh vials of vaccine while an ILR can store 7,100 vials.

Cold boxes will be needed with 900 vials capacity and vaccine carriers with 80 vials capacity.

"We are working to set up 14 WICs in Dhaka and 17 ILRs in different districts," Shamsul said, adding, "Steps have been taken to rent cold storages from the BADC [Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation] and other sources to increase national level storage capacity."

As per the contract, Beximco Pharmaceuticals Ltd will deliver the three crore doses to the district level EPI storages from SII in six phases.

"We will be able to accommodate these vaccines smoothly," Shamsul added.

VACCINATION TEAM

A total of 7,344 vaccination teams would work to implement the vaccination programme. Each team will have two vaccine injectors and four volunteers.

Training and orientation of the workers are underway and will be completed by January 27 as per the plan.

The number of vaccination centres is yet to be decided.

Prof Meerjady Sabrina Flora, additional director general (Planning) of the DGHS, said, "We will fix the number of centres in any area based on the number of registered vaccine recipients."

The centres would be set up in each Union Parishad, Upazila Health Complex, district hospitals, government and private medical college hospitals, specialised hospitals, Police and BCG hospitals, and CMH, and chest disease hospitals.

To get vaccinated, people have to collect vaccination cards via digital

registration online.

For this, one has to input personal information including the data from their NID card to register using an app which would be available soon.

Replying to a question on how long it will take for each registration, she said, "We have examined that each registration will require 5-10 minutes to complete. Actually, it depends on the user's competence."

Prof Khurshid Alam added, "We know each house in the country has at least one competent member for this. Besides, there are alternatives everywhere."

After registration, the date and related information for the first dose of vaccination will be sent to the given mobile number via text.

Each person will have to fill up and sign a vaccine receiving agreement before taking both the shots.

The second dose would be administered 8-12 weeks after the first shot.

VACCINE SAFETY

Officials said there would be primary medical support in each vaccination centre to tackle any adverse effects of the shots.

They said there was a surveillance committee under the Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA) which was working to prepare the "Pharmacovigilance and Adverse Events Following Immunization Protocol".

"The side effects are minimal. Vaccine recipients may feel mild to moderate dizziness or fever or both. Except this, one can develop anaphylaxis resulting in breathing difficulty and fever," Mizanur Rahman, director of Management Information System at the DGHS said in the programme.

Fighting for job they won't let her have

FROM PAGE 1

Zubayer Rahman Chowdhury and Kazi Zinat Hoque ruled that women cannot become Nikah (Muslim marriage) registrars due to "certain physical conditions", religious "disqualifications" and the "social and practical conditions of Bangladesh".

"It has to be borne in mind that due to certain physical conditions a lady cannot enter the mosque during a certain time of the month. She is even excused from performing the mandatory daily prayers during this particular time. This disqualification does not allow her to conduct the religious task. We are mindful of the fact that Muslim marriage is a religious ceremony and has to be guided by the terms and dictates of Islam," the HC observed.

In the full text of the verdict, the HC said the primary role and duty of a Nikah registrar is to solemnise the marriage between Muslim couples, which is essentially a religious ceremony.

On account of rapid urbanisation coupled with a lack of open spaces, a recent trend has developed to have the Nikah ceremony solemnised at local mosques, it said.

According to the full text of the HC verdict, a marriage ceremony is not merely a family or social event, but it is essentially a religious ceremony which entails certain religious functions.

The marriage ceremony is usually conducted either by the Nikah Registrar himself or by the Imam of the mosque of the locality where the marriage ceremony takes place.

"How is religion related to this? A marriage registrar will simply be registering the marriage," said Siddiqua

in her reaction to the verdict yesterday. "If people want a man to conduct the religious ceremony, they can get a separate imam. The registration can then be done separately."

Siddiqua has filed an appeal against the High Court's decision.

Rights activists especially in the field of menstrual safety and hygiene are siding with Siddiqua, and decry the verdict as a backwards step. This further entrenches the social stereotype that menstruating women are impure, they said.

"The verdict has justified existing social taboos about a menstruating woman being impure," said Sharmin Kabir, who runs Wreeta, an organisation which provides sustainable and affordable menstrual management services.

Naripokkho circulated a statement saying they are surprised, angry and disappointed.

"The fact that the High Court took menstruation to be an impediment for a woman when becoming a marriage registrar is illogical and ridiculous. This is a violation of a woman's constitutional right," the statement said.

"Instead of using religion and society as an excuse to take such a backward-thinking step, we expect decisions to reflect the government's commitment towards equality," the organisation added.

"Why is the whole burden of impurity to be borne by women?" questioned Muktasree Chakma Sathi, founder and executive director of Supporting People and Rebuilding Communities, an organisation that has worked with menstrual health advocacy in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Prothom Alo Jt Editor Mizanur Rahman Khan no more

FROM PAGE 1

December 5 after he tested positive for coronavirus on December 2.

As his health kept failing, he was taken to Universal Medical College Hospital in Mohakhali on December 10. He had been treated at the hospital's intensive care unit.

Doctors pronounced him dead around 6:05pm yesterday.

Mizanur was admitted to the "Covid-19 Zone" of the hospital, doctor Zahid Ahmed Siddiqui told Prothom Alo. After he tested negative on December 15 and December 16, Mizanur was taken out of the "Covid-19 Zone".

Mizanur was born on October 31, 1967 in Nalchity, Jhalakathi.

He had been a journalist for almost four decades. He had honours and a masters degree on accounting from BM College in Barisal.

He was best known for his articles on constitution, law, judicial matters, and independence of the judiciary.

His first book on appointment in the judiciary was published in 1995.

His notable books include "Shongbidhan Ebong Tottobodhayak Sarkar Niye Bitorko" (1995), "Bangladesh-er Rajneeti Shonkoter Boshisto" (2003), "Tatabadhyak Sarkar: Oshubho Chinho" (2009), "1971 American Gopon Potro" (2006), and "American Nothigulite Mujib Hotya" (2013).

Mizanur had been studying "the genesis and philosophy of the first constitution" and different aspects of the country's Liberation War.

Mizanur also worked for Samakal, Jugantor, and Mukto Kanto.

Prothom Alo expressed deep shock and prayed for eternal peace of the departed soul. The daily also conveyed sympathy to the bereaved family members.

Jatiya Press Club, Dhaka Reporters Unity, and Editors Guild expressed deep condolences.

Awami League-led 14-party alliance, BNP, Jatiya Party, Workers Party of Bangladesh, and Gonoshasthya Kendra also expressed condolences.

AL in power for a long time helped accelerate development: PM

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has said it has been possible for the Awami League government to make Bangladesh a role model of development in the world as it is in state power for a long time.

"The whole world respects today's Bangladesh... the government has been able to do that as a scope has been created for it due to its long stay in power," she said.

The premier was speaking at the weekly cabinet meeting, held at Bangladesh Secretariat, virtually from the Gono Bhaban.

Hasina said once Bangladesh used to be known for natural calamities, cyclones, flood and poverty. "But no-one talks about that these days. Rather, Bangladesh has set an example in the whole world on how to achieve development, reduce poverty, generate employment, develop the lifestyle of people and provide healthcare. This trend has to be continued."

Terming 2021 a very important year for the country due to the birth centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Golden Jubilee of the country's independence, the PM said Bangabandhu wanted to build a poverty- and hunger-free Bangladesh.

She expressed her gratitude to the people for giving her the scope with their mandate in the last three general elections.

Talking about the Padma Bridge issue, Hasina said a famous person had raised questions about the bridge and that individual committed the notorious job just for holding the managing director's post of a bank.

"It was very unfortunate," she said without mentioning any name.

The PM also said the government took the matter as a challenge and had decided to build the bridge with its own resources and that bridge is now a reality.

"This particular decision has changed the image of Bangladesh across the world. And this proves that Bangladesh is not dependent on anyone."

She said the country's vast workforce and other resources have to be utilised properly to take the country forward.

Covid-19 infection rate drops below 7pc

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh saw a daily infection rate of 6.02 percent with 849 new cases reported until early yesterday.

The country recorded a daily infection rate of 8.29 percent on January 10, 7.52 percent on January 4, and 8.18 percent on January 1. Bangladesh has recorded 523,302 cases so far.

Also, the country's fatality number rose to 7,803 and death rate to 1.49 percent, with 22 more Covid-19 deaths in 24 hours till yesterday morning. The first death from the virus in Bangladesh was reported on March 18.

So far, 3,371,416 tests, including 14,097 new ones, have been carried out. The overall infection rate stood at 15.52 percent, the Directorate General of Health Services said.

However, 467,718 patients have recovered so far. The recovery rate is 89.38 percent.

The country's total infection number reached the 500,000-mark on December 20. The death toll exceeded 7,000 on December 12.

Australian charged over Iraqi oil bribes scandal

AFP, Sydney

Australian police yesterday charged a man in connection with allegations a Sydney-based firm paid US\$78 million in bribes to secure lucrative Iraqi oil contracts.

The man, who was not named by police, was identified in media reports as former Leighton Holdings executive David Savage.

Police said a 60-year-old was charged with two counts of knowingly providing misleading information contrary to the Corporations Act.