

BANGLADESH UPDATE



890

New cases in 24hrs



5,24,910

Total cases



7,833

Deaths



4,69,522

Recoveries



1,979,334

Deaths



92,441,754

Total cases

BGB stops BSF move to build border fence

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

Indian Border Security Force (BSF) has stopped installation of a barbed wire fence along the zero line of the Fultala-Batulji border in Moulvibazar's Juri upazila following objections of Border Guard Bangladesh.

Lt Col Gazi Shahidullah, commanding officer of BGB 52 Battalion, yesterday over the phone said BSF started setting up a barbed wire fence 150 yards from the zero line on Sunday.

He claimed that the BSF did not follow the international rule that no fence could be installed within 150 yards of the zero line. This created tension between the two sides, he said.

Later in the day, the BSF stopped installation of the fence after a flag meeting between BGB and BSF.

The situation at the border is calm, the BGB official added.

Masuk Mia, chairman of Fultala union parishad, said the BGB and the BSF intensified patrolling along the border.

Pompeo's remarks irresponsible

Foreign ministry says refuting claim Al-Qaeda carried out attacks in Bangladesh

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Dhaka has termed Washington's remarks linking terrorist group Al-Qaeda with Bangladesh irresponsible and unfounded.

In a statement on January 12 on the US state department's website, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, "Imagine too the potential to completely upend fragile places with an established Al-Qaeda presence like Libya, Yemen, and the Maghreb, or increase turmoil in places like Bangladesh, where Al-Qaeda cells have carried out attacks."

In response, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement yesterday strongly rejecting Pompeo's comments as "irresponsible". There is no evidence

of any presence of Al-Qaeda in Bangladesh, it said.

"Such irresponsible comments by a senior leader is very unfortunate and unacceptable," the foreign ministry said.

Bangladesh, under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, maintains a "Zero Tolerance" policy against all forms of terrorism and violent extremism, and has been undertaking all possible measures and actions to address the menace, it said.

"If any such claim could be substantiated with evidence, the government of Bangladesh would be happy to take necessary measures against such activities."

'He must go'

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toward impeaching the president for his role in the Jan. 6 siege. The source said no final decision has been reached on the timing of Senate action.

Trump's supporters on Jan. 6 breached the building's security, sent lawmakers fleeing and left five dead in their wake, including a police officer. The mob interrupted the formal certification of Biden's victory in the Nov. 3 election.

Pelosi said Trump has engaged in a "war on democracy," and that the "insurrectionists" and "domestic terrorists" who stormed the Capitol were "sent here by the president."

Trump - already one of only three presidents to be impeached - would become the first president to see it happen twice if the House approves the measure.

Some Republicans made speeches earlier in the day urging the House not to impeach Trump in the interest in promoting national healing.

Lawmakers remained on edge after last week's violence, and large numbers of National Guard troops wearing fatigues and carrying rifles were stationed outside and inside the building.

Earlier Trump traveled to Alamo, Texas, and although he urged "peace and calm" during a visit to the US-Mexico border wall, his overall message was of refusal to take blame for last week's violence.

"The 25th Amendment is of zero risk to me but will come back to haunt Joe Biden and the Biden administration. As the expression goes, be careful what you wish for," Trump said, reading from prepared remarks.

Meanwhile, Trump's social media woes continued late Tuesday when video-sharing giant YouTube said it was suspending his official account for at least a week, out of concern his videos could incite violence.

Under the US Constitution, impeachment in the House triggers a trial in the Senate. Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell had previously suggested no trial could begin until the Senate was scheduled to be back in regular session on Jan.

HC calls it 'naked interference'

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The short verdict was delivered on December 10 and the full text yesterday.

On November 19, 2014, the ACC filed the petition with the HC challenging a Sylhet court's order of January 26, 2012, that granted a government prayer to withdraw a corruption case against Md Abdul Kashem, chairman Number-4 Borodal Uttar Union in Tahirpur upazila, and two others.

The Sylhet court also exempted the accused from the case proceedings.

The case was filed with Tahirpur Police Station on April 5, 2007, against the accused in connection with embezzling 17 bundles of corrugated iron sheets meant for government relief to the poor. The sheets were worth Tk 1.36 lakh.

On February 11, 2011, the home ministry recommended withdrawal of the case.

The government reportedly recommended withdrawal of over 7,000 criminal cases filed before the Awami League assumed power.

In the full verdict, the HC said, "Such an endeavour [having the case withdrawn] on the part of the government can be regarded as a naked interference in the affairs of an independent body like the commission.

"Because section 3(2) of the Act of 2004 [ACC Act] postulates in clear terms that the Anti-Corruption Commission shall be an independent and impartial

body. More so, it has already been notified that as per mandate of section 10(4) of the Act of 1958 [Criminal Law Amendment Act], the Anti-Corruption Commission is the only authorised body to withdraw from the prosecution against any person either generally or in respect of any one or more offences under the Act of 2004 or the Act of 1958," it said.

"Thus, it is patent that the government has nothing to do in respect of withdrawal of a case filed under the Act of 2004 or the Act of 1958. Be that as it may, if the government wants to withdraw a case pending before the Court of Special Judge, in that event it can only make a request or express its pious wish to the commission and if the government makes such a request, the commission is free to decide indifferently whether it would consider such request or proposal of the government or not," the HC judges said.

Khurshid Alam Khan, the ACC lawyer, told The Daily Star that it is the established provision of the law that the government cannot withdraw any corruption case filed or moved by the ACC and even it cannot recommend for their withdrawal.

The HC in the full text clearly interpreted the law in detail, he added.

Deputy Attorney General Sarwar Hossain Bappi refused to make any comment on the HC observation.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Frontline health workers collecting samples from a boy to get him tested for coronavirus. The photo was taken yesterday afternoon at the outdoor section of Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College and Hospital. Many of the employees contracted the virus, recovered and returned to the testing process over the months.

Confusion reigns over vaccine price

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will understandably be less ... When they would sell it, they would add their expenditure with the profit," he said.

"We cannot expect that we will get [the vaccine] at the price same as their production cost. But we will look into at what price vaccines are being sold in the international market. We will try to control the price at which we will get the vaccines.

"Many countries, not one or two, will produce vaccines. If one country charges more, we will try to go for another country. We have that option," Mustafa Kamal said.

Following the Reuters report and the statement of the finance minister, The Daily Star contacted the health minister and the Beximco authorities.

"We will speak as per our agreement. We will get it [the vaccines] at the same price the Indian authorities purchased from Serum Institute of India. So if India gets the vaccines at prices lower than what has been fixed for us, we will also get the vaccines at lower prices," Zahid Maleque said.

"If India buys the shots at prices lower than us, then it is a good news for us. We will then get more shots from Serum," he said.

The health minister insisted that there was no room for confusion over the prices. "Everything will be done according to the agreement. The lower the price is, the more we will get."

Asked whether the contract will be made public, he said the agreement

was signed publicly and claimed that everything written on the papers had already been made public. "The agreement does not have any hidden clause."

The tripartite agreement between the government, Serum and Beximco was signed on November 5 last year to purchase three crore shots of Oxford vaccine from Serum at \$4 per shot.

The government has recently said the first instalment of 50 lakh doses would arrive on January 25 and the vaccination would start in the first week of next month.

Each jab, however, will cost the government \$5 as it will have to pay Beximco in service charges and for transporting the vaccines to the government vaccination centres.

Contacted, Nazmul Hassan Papon said Bangladesh government would get the vaccine at the same price India is paying and that there was no reason to be worried.

"Bangladesh is purchasing the vaccine at \$4 per shot, but it's a tentative price. But if India purchases the vaccine at a lower price, Serum will also reduce the price accordingly for us.

"As per the agreement, there is a guarantee that Serum will give us the vaccine at the same price it sells to India. There is no room for deviation [from it]."

"We will not pay a single cent more [than India]," Papon said.

"Since we are yet to receive the first instalment of vaccines, it would be too early to make any comment on what

would be the final price. Because India bought each shot at 200 rupees in the first phase and it might go up to 250 rupees," he added.

Earlier in the month, the health minister, the health secretary and the Beximco MD insisted that Bangladesh would get the vaccine at the same price as Indian government.

BEXIMCO TO SELL VACCINES AT PRIVATE MARKET

The drug-maker will import 10 lakh doses from SII for private distribution. Beximco is buying each dose at \$8 from SII.

"Among the doses, various pharmaceuticals companies have already ordered for eight lakh doses," Papon told this newspaper.

He said they would sell the vaccine after the commencement of government's mass vaccination programme.

Beximco Chief Operating Officer Rabbur Reza said the price of the vaccine in the private market was yet to be decided.

After arrival of the vaccine, the Directorate General of Drug Administration will fix the price, he said.

He also said Beximco had already sent a proposal to Serum for purchasing another 20 lakh doses.

Contacted, DGDA Director General Maj Gen Md Mahubur Rahman said the price of the vaccine to be sold in the private market would be finalised under government regulation.

Govt mulls allowing human trial

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of its vaccine candidate and is likely to submit a proposal to Bangladesh Medical Research Council (BMRC) within days for conducting first-stage human trial, say its officials.

There are three stages of human trial of a vaccine.

3 VACCINE CANDIDATES
The icddr, has applied to the BMRC for permission to run third-stage clinical trial of "COVAXIN" developed by Bharat Biotech.

Contacted, BMRC Director Dr Mahmood-uz-jahan declined to comment on the issue.

"It is not ethically right to comment on such research-related issue. You will know when it will be made public."

Meanwhile, the authorities of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) and China's Anhui Zhifei Longcom Biologic Pharmacy are working to finalise a plan to run last-stage human trial. The two sides last week agreed to run the trial.

Prof Kanak Kanti Barua, vice chancellor of the BSMMU, told The Daily Star recently, "We have replied to them [Anhui Zhifei]. We will run trial... It will need time to finalise the procedures."

Besides, the Institute of Medical Biology Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences is planning to run last-stage human trial through a private research organisation in Bangladesh, a health official told this newspaper.

Bangladesh has so far confirmed purchase of Covid vaccines from two sources. Three crore doses of Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines will come from Serum Institute of India (SII) and

another 6.8 crore shots from global initiative called COVAX.

Recently, the COVAX, co-led by WHO, GAVI, CEPI, offered four lakh doses of Pfizer vaccine to Bangladesh to vaccinate its frontline workers. The Pfizer vaccine needs to be stored at minus 70 degrees Celsius while the SII vaccine can be kept at 2-8 degrees Celsius.

Talking to this newspaper yesterday, Health Minister Zahid Maleque said, "We will take Pfizer vaccine. We have enough storage capacity for that."

Earlier on Monday, Prof ABM Khurshid Alam, director general at the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), said the government was exploring the existing storage capacity to that end.

According to health ministry officials, the government is also thinking about allowing private companies to import Covid vaccines to sell those in the domestic market.

'SELECT RIGHT VACCINE'
Experts have called for prompt exploration of sources of those vaccines, which will give the Bangladeshi population herd immunity for a long time and are cost-effective and compatible with the country's cold chain infrastructure.

At a recent discussion, a number of experts said it is uncertain how long the vaccines approved so far will give immunity. Besides, if the novel coronavirus mutates regularly like the influenza virus, there may be a need for regular vaccination.

There should be two vaccination goals -- one is to reduce mortality and morbidity, and the other is to gain herd

immunity, they said.

"India has planned smartly to vaccinate 26 crore people aged above 50. It will help reduce the number of deaths. We should also take such a strategy for now. In the future, we may get single-dose vaccines that may provide lifelong immunity," said Prof Md Sayedur Rahman, chairman at the BSMMU's pharmacology department.

"Some of the vaccine candidates which are at the second stage of human trial are single-dose and suitable for our existing cold chain. Those can even be stored in normal temperature in the country," he told this newspaper yesterday.

Sayedur said Bangladeshi researchers should get in touch with those vaccine inventors to be part of their research.

He also mentioned that if Bangladesh allows human trial of vaccine candidates, it may have three advantages -- priority in getting vaccines, preferential pricing and technology transfer.

If any delay occurs in making decisions on such trial, it will happen not because of the scientific community, but due to other players in the decision-making process, noted Sayedur, also a member of BMRC's Ethical Review Committee.

According to the New York Times Coronavirus Vaccine Tracker, eight vaccines, including that of Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna and Oxford-AstraZeneca, have so far been approved by the US, the UK and several other countries for emergency use.

Besides, 20 vaccine candidates are at the final stage of human trial and another 21 at the second stage.

14 more die, 890 get Covid

UNB, Dhaka

With 890 new Covid-19 patients detected in the 24 hours ending at 8:00am yesterday, the total number of infections in the country rose to 524,910.

As per the latest data, the daily infection rate dropped to 5.66 percent.

The country recorded 8.29 percent infection rate on January 10, 7.52 percent on January 4, and 8.18 percent on January 1.

The country's fatality number rose to 7,833 with 14 deaths in the 24 hours. The death rate stands at 1.49 percent.

So far, 3,40,1506 tests, including 16,338 new ones, have been carried out.

The overall infection rate stood at 15.43 percent, the Directorate General of Health Services said.

However, 469,522 patients -- 89.45 percent -- have recovered so far.

The country's infection number reached the 500,000-mark on December 20. The first cases were reported on March 8. The death toll exceeded 7,000 on December 12.

CASE UNDER DSA

Baul singer Rita Dewan granted ad interim bail

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka tribunal yesterday granted ad interim bail to Baul singer Rita Dewan in connection with a case filed for "hurting religious sentiment" under the Digital Security Act.

Dhaka Cyber Tribunal Judge Mohammad Ash Sams Joglul Hossain granted bail to Rita till January 27 after she was produced before the court, seeking bail in the case, Shamim Al Mamun, bench assistant of the tribunal, told The Daily Star.

The tribunal on December 2 last year issued arrest warrants against Rita, Shahjahan Kabir and Iqbal Hossain, accepting the probe report of the case. The report was filed by the Police Bureau of Investigation.

Shahjahan is now behind bars, while Iqbal is on the run, the prosecution said.

On February 2 last year, lawyer Imrul Hasan filed the case against Rita with the cyber tribunal. There were three other cases filed against Rita in Dhaka, Chattogram and Jhenidah, said Rita's lawyer Abdullah Al Noman.

The Jhenidah case was dismissed by the district court, but the Dhaka court accepted the case filed by Imrul and issued an arrest warrant on December 2.

A hearing for the other DSA case filed in Dhaka's Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Court will be held tomorrow, and the court will decide whether or not to accept the case, her lawyer said.

This means even though Rita received ad interim bail in one case yesterday, she will still need to get bail in two other cases.

The probe report details that Rita was doing a "Pala Gaan" session with fellow artiste Shah Alam Sarkar, where the topic being debated was "Living Beings versus The Greatest". The event was held on the night of December 10, 2019, at Shahjahan's house in Tangail's Kalihati upazila.

Shahjahan and Iqbal had uploaded Rita's songs to their YouTube channels, according to the case documents.

On February 1 last year, complainant Imrul was at home when he came across the video on social media.

"The complainant was extremely angry and hurt," said the PBI report. "And upon finding no way out, the complainant went to Kadamtai Police Station to file the case."

The complainant alleged that Rita was making "derogatory comments" about religion.

The PBI report "investigated the matter" and wrote in their report, "Upon investigating videos of Rita's songs, we have found evidence of the crime. The words she chose to debate this issue hurt the religious sentiment of the audience."

Following the filing of the lawsuit, Rita, along with her two daughters, had posted another video on social media apologising for "causing hurt".

France court probes minister for conflict of interest

AFP, Paris

A French court has launched an investigation into Justice Minister Eric Dupond-Moretti for alleged conflict of interest relating to his time as a lawyer, prosecutors told AFP yesterday.

The Court of the Republic, which deals with cases involving suspected misconduct by sitting cabinet members, launched the probe following complaints by Anticor, an anti-corruption association, and three magistrates' unions.

US military leaders issue

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While a number of Trump's cabinet members including acting Defense Secretary Chris Miller condemned the storming of the top US general, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley, was silent until now.

"The violent riot in Washington DC on January 6, 2021 was a direct assault on the US Congress, the Capitol building, and our Constitutional process," the seven generals and one admiral said in an internal memo to troops, adding that the military remained committed to protecting and defending the Constitution.

"The rights of freedom of speech and assembly do not give anyone the right to resort to violence, sedition and insurrection," the memo, seen by Reuters, said.

The military leaders said that

President-elect Joe Biden would be inaugurated on Jan. 20 and become their commander in chief.

"Any act to disrupt the Constitutional process is not only against our traditions, values, and oath; it is against the law."

US officials said Milley had not commented on last week's events because he wanted to stay out of politics.

The silence was in sharp contrast to June, when Milley made a controversial walk to a church with Trump after law enforcement officers backed by National Guard troops used tear-inducing chemicals and rubber bullets to clear the area of peaceful protesters.

Some service members have privately expressed concern that senior leaders did not provide direction in the aftermath of the attack on American democracy on Wednesday.

On Twitter, the head of US forces in South Korea said that what happened occurred in Washington DC on Wednesday was an "attempted insurrection."

"If you are serving in uniform and think it was something else, I would encourage (you) to sit down and read the constitution that you swore an oath to support and defend," General Robert Abrams said.

There has also been a renewed focus on extremism within the US military after the Capitol storming.

The Army told Reuters on Tuesday that it was working with the FBI to see if any attackers were current service members and with the Secret Service to see if any of the nearly 10,000 National Guard troops securing Biden's inauguration would need additional screening.