

BANGLADESH UPDATE
762 New cases in 24hrs

5,26,485 Total cases

7,862 Deaths

4,71,123 Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE
2,006,441 Deaths

93,728,696 Total cases

New migrant caravans leaving Honduras to pursue American dream

AFP, San Pedro Sula

Hundreds of asylum seekers are forming new migrant caravans in Honduras, planning to walk thousands of kilometers through Central America to the United States via Guatemala and Mexico, in search of a better life under the new administration of President-elect Joe Biden.

A first group of some 300 people

set out at dawn on Thursday from San Pedro Sula, the second-largest city in Honduras, headed for Corinto, on the border with Guatemala, some 100 kilometers (60 miles) northwest.

Traveling in small groups, some bearing the Honduran flag, most of the migrants wore face masks to protect against the coronavirus.

"We trust God that Biden is going to help us," said Amanda, a mother traveling with her 10-year-old son.

2 arrested over human trafficking

FROM PAGE 1

Senior Superintendent of Police Jisanul Hoque of the Criminal Investigation Department's organised crime unit yesterday said Italy police nabbed Jafer from Cosenza based on Interpol's red notice.

Meanwhile, the CID arrested Shahadat from Dhaka airport upon his arrival from abroad, he said.

The CID official, however, refused to disclose details regarding the arrest.

Mohiul Islam, assistant inspector general of police at National Central Bureau (NCB) in Dhaka, said Bangladesh does not have any treaty with Italy for extraditing prisoners.

However, it will be possible to bring him back home from Italy through mutual cooperation, he said.

On May 28 last year, alleged human traffickers killed 30 migrant workers, including 26 Bangladeshis in Libya. The incident caused a huge public outcry at home and abroad.

The killing took place at a smuggling warehouse in the city of Mizdah near Tripoli. Twelve more Bangladeshis were also injured in the attack, nine of whom were repatriated.

CID official Jisanul said 26 cases were filed all over Bangladesh in connection with the killing incident.

The CID is investigating 25 cases, he said.

Some 299 people have been made accused in the first information reports of the cases, while police have so far arrested 171 of them, he added.

So far, 42 arrestees have given confessional statements before the court, he said.

Interpol issued a red notice against six alleged human traffickers following assistance from the Police Headquarters in Dhaka, said the CID official.

Another suspect in the Interpol's "wanted-list" might have been hiding in Italy, he added.

Interpol put the six human traffickers of Bangladesh in their "wanted list" on charges of deceiving job seekers and "wrongfully confining and killing" people over ransom demands.

The four others are: Minto Mia, 41, Shapan, 28, Tanzirul, 35, all from Kishoreganj, and Molla Nazrul Islam, 43, from Madaripur.

The CID wrote to the NCB, the Bangladesh counterpart of Interpol, in October last year against the six when the process started.

Red notices by Interpol are issued for fugitives wanted either for prosecution or to serve a sentence.

A red notice is a request to law enforcement worldwide to locate and provisionally arrest a person pending extradition, surrender, or similar legal action.



Covering herself with pieces of worn-out clothes, an underprivileged woman sleeps under the open sky near Kanchpur Bridge in Narayanganj amid the winter chill yesterday. Winter compounds the misery of the homeless and low-income people as they find it difficult to stay warm.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

It's a mess in Maalkhanas

FROM PAGE 1

In small maalkhanas, police in some cases are forced to store evidence in open spaces like rooftops, makeshift tin-shed structures, corridors or stair rooms and even in generator rooms.

The Daily Star gathered this picture after visiting 33 police stations over two weeks in mid-October last year in Dhaka, Chattogram and Khulna metropolitan cities, Narayanganj, Gazipur, Bogura, Kushtia, Jhenaidah, Dinajpur, Faridpur and Bagerhat districts, and after talking to police officers concerned.

These correspondents had the opportunity to go inside two highly restricted maalkhanas in DMP area and Kushtia respectively, and managed to get a glance of two others in Khulna and DMP.

In two maalkhanas, in Kushtia and Dhaka, evidence as varied as firearms, money, gold ornaments, colour TV, desktop monitor, laptop, keyboard, wooden dining table, showcase, trousers and shirts, fake currencies, bottles of liquor and Phensedyl, packs of marijuana, pillows, quilt, and sewing machines were found to have been kept on the floor like rubbish. Only the gold ornaments and money are kept in locked boxes.

However, the condition of the DMP maalkhana was better. Housed in a new building, most of the evidence was kept with a tag number known as Properties Register (PR) number on it. The same number is also written on a register book for easy tracing.

A police station has one such storeroom where evidence in all cases -- registered with it -- are kept until those are disposed of in court.

With trials of around 37 lakh cases still pending with higher and lower courts and the number growing every passing day, evidence in police storerooms is also piling up higher.

However, the police officials this newspaper spoke to claimed that there was no record of instances where the result of a case was changed or any accused was not convicted in a trial due to damage or loss of evidence at the police stations.

According to the Police Headquarters, there are 622 police stations across the country -- including railway police stations and river police stations -- and 50 of them are under Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP).

SORRY STATE OF MAALKHANAS During a recent visit to the Teigaon Industrial Area Police Station, these correspondents found a lot of goods and documents piled up inside and outside the storeroom. Some evidence was also kept in a tin-shed makeshift structure in the compound.

A sub-inspector of the station, on condition of anonymity, said his allergies get triggered when he enters the storeroom, where around 400 pieces of evidence have been kept lying around for years.

The officer said they clean it from time to time yet the evidence often gets covered with dust.

Some of these were lying on two racks in the veranda and on the floor outside the storeroom.

A number of OCs in the capital said pieces of evidence in different cases are preserved in the police stations though these are supposed to be submitted to the court along with the charge sheet.

One of them said that a few years ago, courts requested the police not to submit evidence to the court with charge sheets and rather preserve those in the police stations as the courts do not have enough space to preserve them.

"That is why a lot of evidence is stockpiled in the police stations at present. It is normal that some of the evidence will get damaged," said the OC, requesting anonymity.

Kafrul Police Station houses its storeroom on the first floor. But in front of the stairway on the ground floor was a carrom board, an electronic item, and some furniture -- all evidence in cases.

A policeman said the evidence has been kept there for a long time due to lack of space in the storeroom.

Shah Ali Police Station OC Asaduzzaman said the police station is housed in a three-storey rented house built on less than two kathas of land.

He said their maalkhana is a small room but they try their best to preserve important evidence properly while they struggle to accommodate all the officers and staffers at the building.

Contacted, Sohel Rana, spokesperson for Police Headquarters, said, "Conditions of storerooms in those police stations which are housed in old buildings are poor. But still we are trying to give maximum effort to keep the evidence protected."

In the last 15 years, more than 300 police stations' buildings were reconstructed, and maalkhanas in the new building are comparatively spacious, he said.

"A proposal to renovate the buildings of the rest of the police stations is at the home ministry for approval. We hope the old thana buildings will be constructed or renovated by 2025," said Sohel, also assistant inspector general (media).

Md Walid Hossain, deputy commissioner (media and public relations) of DMP, claimed despite shortage of space in some police stations, important evidence is kept with utmost care.

Earlier, evidence used to be kept hanging on tree branches due to a shortage of space but now such a situation no longer exists, he added.

He further said around 30 percent of the total 50 police stations in the DMP area are housed in rented buildings where the shortage of space is acute. As per new government policy, a police station in the city is supposed to be built on 15 kathas of land while those outside the capital on 1.5 bighas, he added.

In big police stations, there are around 300 to 400 items of evidence while in small ones, the number ranges between 200 and 250, officials say.

Mostaq Ahmed, additional commissioner (crime) of Chattogram Metropolitan Police, said they were now removing all the evidence of 20-25 year-old cases, trials of which have been completed, with the permission of the courts.

[Our correspondents from Kushtia, Khulna and staff correspondent in Chattogram contributed to this report]

UN refugee chief 'very worried' for Eritreans in Ethiopia

AFP, Geneva

The UN refugees chief said Thursday he was "extremely troubled" by the humanitarian situation facing Eritrean refugees in northern Ethiopia, citing strong indications of "major violations" of international law.

Filippo Grandi said he was "very worried" for the safety and well-being of Eritrean refugees in two refugee camps in the Tigray region, which United Nations agencies have been unable to access following an Ethiopian military offensive.

"I remain extremely troubled by the humanitarian situation in the Tigray region of Ethiopia and its impact on civilians, in particular Eritrean refugees hosted in the region," the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) chief said in a statement.

60 municipalities

FROM PAGE 1

Returning Officer Rokonuzzaman Khan said additional members of law enforcing agencies have been deployed to prevent further violence.

Our staff correspondent in Rajshahi reports that two supporters of the AL nominee Shahiduzzaman for Arani municipality were severely hacked in an attack on Thursday night.

They were Bazlur Rahman, 45, general secretary of Nurmagar Ward Awami League, and his nephew Arif Hossain, 30.

They were admitted to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital, said Nazrul Islam, officer-in-charge of Bagha Police Station.

Our correspondent in Bogura reports that an independent contestant has expressed fear of attacks at a press conference.

Alamgir Shahi Sumon alleged that lawmaker Sahadara Mannan's son Shakhawat Hossain Sajal had been intimidating voters.

Contacted, the lawmaker said, "My son did not threaten anyone."

In Vedorganj municipality, a campaign rally of Abul Bashir Chokdar was attacked.

Bashar's wife Afrin Mitu and a reporter of an online news portal were among the 10 injured.

Our correspondent in Tangail reports that a campaign office of BNP nominee Mahmudul Haque Shanu was vandalised on Thursday night.

Shanu blamed AL men for the attack and made a complaint to the election commission.

Returning officer Kamrul Islam said steps would be taken after investigation.

Closure extended

FROM PAGE 1

The authorities then extended the closure several times as the pandemic showed little sign of abating.

The long closure led to cancellation of examinations and left academic calendars in disarray.

The fresh extension comes at a time when the tally of confirmed coronavirus cases now stands at 526,485 after the health authorities reported 762 new infections in 24 hours till 4:15pm yesterday.

Thirteen more people died from Covid-19 during the same 24-hour period, according to a press release issued by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

The total number of deaths now stands at 7,862.

Infection rate

FROM PAGE 1

ones, have been carried out. The overall infection rate stood at 15.34 percent, said a press release of the Directorate General of Health Services.

Meanwhile, 471,123 patients -- 89.48 percent -- have recovered so far.

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

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Concerns grow in India over safety

FROM PAGE 1

"But... I don't think we should jumpstart the process by using it before it has been proved."

The main opposition Congress party accused the government of putting lives at risk. The health minister of one state, Chhattisgarh, has said the Bharat vaccine is "not safe" to deploy.

Critics suspect that the swift approval was motivated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's protectionist push for "self-reliance", and by the desire to save money.

The government responded to the criticism by saying the vaccine is "110-percent safe".

Privately owned Bharat Biotech, set up in 1996 by husband and wife Krishna Ella and Suchitra Ella, is an established player in inoculations.

It has delivered over three billion vaccines for diseases worldwide including Zika and Japanese Encephalitis and an ultra-cheap shot for Hepatitis B.

The firm intends to supply Covaxin to other countries including Brazil.

But activists have accused the firm of cutting

corners and breaching rules in conducting trials in India.

In the central city of Bhopal, Bharat's local partner the People's College of Medical Sciences and Research Centre paid 750 rupees (\$8) each to 1,722 recruits.

Rajesh Kapur, vice chancellor of the private hospital, said it adhered to all proper protocols and ethical practices, including counselling and monitoring subjects, seeking their informed consent, and arranging care in case of health complications.

But 10 participants AFP spoke with, several of whom are illiterate, said they had not been properly informed.

Some said they were not given any documentation or briefing, while others said they were told they were being given a vaccine that would soon become mandatory nationwide.

Being informed of risks and signing consent forms have been mandatory since the government tightened the rules of drug testing -- a booming industry in India -- following a

number of scandals.

A detailed email questionnaire from AFP to Bharat on the claims was not answered.

The Bhopal controversies have been a lightning rod for criticism across the nation about the trials and the wisdom of rushing the vaccine's roll-out.

"There seems to be clear misses in the way these trials have been conducted," said Anant Bhan, an expert on bioethics and health policy.

NEPAL OKAYS COVISHIELD

Nepal yesterday granted approval for AstraZeneca's Covishield vaccine against coronavirus, the government said, following a meeting with neighbouring India.

Nepal has reported 266,816 cases and 1,948 deaths from Covid-19, reports Reuters.

The announcement follows a meeting between India's foreign minister S Jaishankar and his Nepali counterpart Pradeep Kumar Gyawali yesterday where "close cooperation" on the pandemic was discussed, according to a statement by India's foreign ministry.