

BANGLADESH UPDATE



762

New cases in 24hrs



5,26,485

Total cases



7,862

Deaths



4,71,123

Recoveries



2,011,582

Deaths



93,980,290

Total cases

A beacon of light is no more

M ASADUZZAMAN

On January 13, 2021, Hugh Brammer breathed his last in a hospital in Brighton, England. He died at the ripe age of 95 years and thus conventionally speaking it was not an untimely death. But Hugh's absence from this world saddens us because of what he was to the last.

He was one of those very few non-Bangladeshis who always wished the best for this country. And he was professionally a very energetic person and almost to the last breath he had been academically active and writing about Bangladesh agriculture, its physical and other perspectives and how best to take it to greater heights.

He was always ready to engage in debate and put out his arguments based on sound and solid scientific empirical evidence, not being afraid to go against the tide. He had an encyclopaedic knowledge about the country's soil, variations of its characteristics, climate, cropping patterns and how farmers behave under different situations.

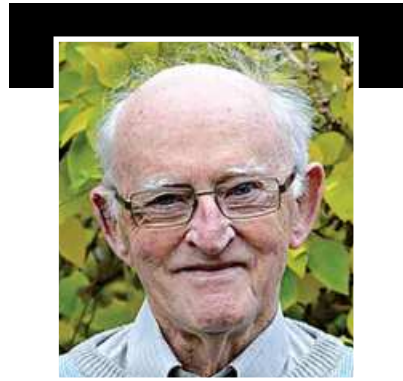
Born in 1925, Hugh had his MA in Geography in 1951 from University of Cambridge. He joined and worked for Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) for 26 years from 1961 to 1987 co-directing soil reconnaissance surveys in several countries including Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, he travelled extensively and came to know about the country's agroecology literally like the palm of his hand, hardly matched by any other person in his position, inside the country or outside. And his knowledge and wisdom he left in the form of about 125 publications including books, book chapters and journal articles.

Ten of his books on Bangladesh agriculture, soil, ecology, climate change and sea level rise, flood management, etc. have been published by the

University Press Limited. Even now he had been involved in writing up a few more papers for which he requested me for certain data which I was most happy to send him. His last mail to me was in early December 2020.

Hugh's contribution to advancement of knowledge had been recognised through many awards that he had received. He had been awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE), President's gold medal for services to Agriculture, Bangladesh; Award of Merit by Tropical Agricultural Association; Busk medal for scientific discovery and research by Royal Geographical Society, London; an Honorary Fellowship at Downing



HUGH BRAMMER
1925-2021

College Cambridge, and Lifetime Achievement Award, University Press Ltd, Bangladesh.

Hugh in his own way had been dreaming for a "Sonar Bangla". But his dream was not tinged with romanticism as many of ours are, but solidly rooted in ground reality. The best we can do to honour him is to continue.

(The writer is a former research director at BIDS)



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.

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.

Around 30% of the total 50 police stations in the DMP area are housed in rented buildings where the shortage of space is acute.

The Daily Star visited 33 police stations

The storeroom at the city's Lalbagh Police Station is a single-storey tin-shed structure with poor conditions and a dearth of space.

OC KM Ashraf Uddin of the station said they face some problems in preserving evidence, but they're trying their best to keep it unharmed.

Replying to a query, he said sometimes they need to hang important evidence like bloodstained clothes on trees or other places on the premises to dry those as any wet evidence in the maalkhana may easily get damaged.

In Khulna city's Sonadanga Model Police Station, some pieces of evidence have been kept inside a generator room as its maalkhana is full.

Asked about it, OC Momtazul Haque said they kept less important evidence in the generator room.

A police officer in Dhaka said several years back one of his colleagues, then a sub-inspector of the city's Jatrahari Police Station, kept in the maalkhana some counterfeit notes seized as evidence in a case.

As he prepared the charge sheet after months of investigation, he went to the storeroom to collect the fake notes to submit those with the charge sheet to the court, he said, requesting anonymity.

But what he found was only some tiny pieces of torn paper, after rats had

chewed them up in the storehouse. The officer, however, could not say how his colleague managed that problem.

The maalkhana on the ground floor of the old building of the station would also often get submerged in rainwater, he added.

'CONDITIONS IMPROVED'
Some of the police officers claimed the condition of storerooms of many police stations is much better now than before.

"As many items of evidence earlier got damaged due to poor condition of maalkhanas, the court often reprimanded us. The condition of many maalkhanas has improved a lot in the last three to four years," said an OC of a city police station, requesting anonymity.

The police officers said now in many cases of murder and rape, the forensic and DNA samples are tested in CID (Criminal Investigation Department) labs, where the evidence is preserved safely.

They also said after seizure of narcotics, a small portion is sent for testing at the labs of CID and Narcotics Control Department while a small portion is preserved at the police station as evidence. The rest are destroyed following court order.

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 Bashar 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.

No antibody tests

FROM PAGE 1

Nurses and volunteers would be administered the vaccine before the mass vaccination programme begins. So, it will give us some insight."

Asked how many people would take part in the pilot test, he said the number was yet to be fixed, adding that the process would involve people who wish to volunteer.

He declined to give the number of vaccination centres where the test would take place.

An official from the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) said the test might take place at three centres.

According to media reports, India has done a dry run in around 1,900 centres before mass vaccination that kicks off today. It aims to inoculate more than 20 percent of the country's 1.3 billion people against Covid-19 in the first phase.

Other countries that have already started the vaccination programme, have also conducted dry runs before rolling out mass vaccination, said experts.

Prof Md Sayedur Rahman, chairman at the BSMMU's pharmacology department, said dry runs were very important. "Through this exercise, problems are identified and their solutions are found."

Sayedur said the government must hold a dry run at least in 200 centres in upazila, district and city levels.

"Otherwise, the mass vaccination programme may face different obstacles during the campaign," he cautioned.

Prof Be-Nazir, a former director of disease control at the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, said dry run helps assess people's response to the inoculation campaign.

DGHS officials said they would not do any antibody test as the World

Health Organization has not made it mandatory.

"We will not do the antibody test. It would have been better if we did it. But it has not been made mandatory by the WHO," Meerjady Sabrina Flora, additional director general of DGHS, told The Daily Star.

A recent study published in a journal found a rising trend of asymptomatic cases in the country.

Another study by the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) and the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr) published in August last year, found that nine percent of the Dhaka city dwellers had already been infected with coronavirus and 78 percent of them had no symptoms.

Prof Dr Nazrul Islam, former Vice-Chancellor of Bangladesh Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), said there were many asymptomatic cases in the country and the antibody test would detect the people with the antibodies.

"Those who developed antibodies do not need vaccines now. We suggested the antibody test but there is a crisis of proper testing kits," he added.

Echoing Prof Nazrul's view, Prof Be-Nazir Ahmed said if antibody testing could have been done, many people who have developed enough antibody would have required a single shot of vaccine, instead of the usual two.

"Antibody tests would indicate whether the person needs a vaccine. Through the test, we can see how much antibody was formed in the body. Whether the person needs two doses or one will be okay," he added.

He also said even after the vaccination, an antibody test is required to see how long the antibody would last.

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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.