

BANGLADESH UPDATE



697

New cases in 24hrs



5,28,329

Total cases



7,922

Deaths



4,73,173

Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE



2,045,228

Deaths



95,808,947

Total cases

ROHINGYA REPATRIATION

Dhaka wants global community's presence

To raise the issue at tripartite meet with Myanmar, China today

PORIMOL PALMA

Rohingyas will feel safe if they see the international community's presence in areas of Myanmar's Rakhine state where they are to be repatriated, Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen said yesterday.

He made the comment before a tripartite meeting, which is going to be held between Bangladesh, Myanmar, and China today, over the repatriation.

Officials at the Bangladesh's foreign ministry said they think the Rohingyas will feel confident and safe if they return to one area as a group.

"We think regaining of confidence among the Rohingyas is very important. If they know well ahead how they will be staying once they return, if they are together in a village and if there is presence of the international community, the repatriation can start soon," the foreign secretary told a few reporters on the eve of the meeting.

Momen, Chinese Vice Minister Luo Zhaohui and Myanmar Permanent Secretary Aye Chan will lead their respective delegations in the virtual meeting.

This will be the second such meetings between the three countries. Earlier, they held a foreign minister-level meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2019.

Two attempts to repatriate the refugees to their homeland -- once on November 15 in 2018 and then again on August 22 in 2019 -- ended in failure after around 750,000 Rohingyas took shelter in Bangladesh to escape a brutal military crackdown in Myanmar's Rakhine in August 2017.

Rohingyas say there is no guarantee of safety, citizenship and basic rights in Rakhine where many Rohingyas were killed, women raped and their houses were burnt -- for which Myanmar now faces a genocide case in the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

In response to the Gambia's case, the ICJ issued provisional order asking Myanmar to prevent further

acts of genocide against the Rohingyas in Rakhine State where some 600,000 of the ethnic community still live. They have no citizenship or other basic rights and faced persecutions for generations, forcing them to flee to other countries, mostly to Bangladesh, since 1980s.

Though many returned in the 1980s and 1990s, the others are reluctant to return after their influx in 2017 due to a lack of safety and security. They also have been demanding presence of the international community in Rakhine as a condition for return.

Bangladesh, meanwhile, is facing serious socio-economic, environmental, security and diplomatic challenges due to the presence of some one million refugees in Cox's Bazar.

Dhaka fears that presence of such a large number of Rohingyas in the country will create regional instability, and wants quick start of the Rohingya repatriation.

A foreign ministry official told this correspondent that Dhaka wants to start the Rohingya repatriation before the monsoon this year.

Last week, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen said Bangladesh handed over to Myanmar a list of 8.4 lakh Rohingyas for verification, but it has so far verified only 42,000 people.

He hopes that Myanmar will speed up the verification process and start the repatriation quickly.

Foreign Secretary Masud said, "It will be more practical if we take a village-based approach. Say, if the identities of the Rohingyas of one village is verified, they can go there together. We can consider the approach on a pilot basis."

He also stressed the need for presence of the international community in the areas where the Rohingyas are repatriated.

The UN, China, ASEAN, Japan, Korea and India can have their representatives present there. China, a very close friend of Myanmar, is appearing to be a guarantor or broker in the repatriation process, and so their presence is very important, he added.



Firefighters rescue passengers from an overturned bus in Pukhuria area of Manikganj's Ghor upazila. The bus, while heading towards Dhaka from Paturia, skidded off the road and flipped amid dense fog around 9:30am yesterday, leaving at least seven people injured.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Similar projects, different stories

FROM PAGE 1

Bridge Construction and Existing Bridges Rehabilitation Project" before the next meeting of Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecneec).

MONEY SAVED

Proper feasibility study and efficient implementation are the two main factors that reduced the cost of the Kanchpur, Meghna and Gumti 2nd Bridge Construction and Existing Bridges Rehabilitation Project, Abu Saleh Md Nuruzzaman, project director, told The Daily Star yesterday.

He said their expenditure on consultancy fees also was less than the original allocation. "While rebuilding the old bridges, we did not require spending money on different things... contractors wanted to import construction materials like rods and stones, but we decided to go for local materials," Nuruzzaman explained how the project cost went down.

Primarily, the cost was set at Tk 8,486.94 crore, of which Japan

International Cooperation Agency (Jica) was supposed to provide Tk 6,429.29 crore.

According to planning ministry documents, the cost has now come down to Tk 7,022.84 crore, and Jica would give Tk 5,713 crore.

Around 85 to 90 percent export and import activities of the country are done using the Chattogram port, but traffic congestion caused by narrow bridges often results in trouble for business.

The completion of the project, almost on time, appears to be a blessing for those businesses, said officials.

THE OPPOSITE CASE

The LGED undertook the Tk 3,926 crore project to build 130 bridges in rural areas to boost rural economy by creating commercial and employment opportunities which in turn will directly benefit the poor and reduce poverty.

The 130 bridges are supposed to be built in 94 upazilas of 40 districts.

The sites were picked on the basis of lists provided by the lawmakers.

The project officials have so far completed less than 20 percent of the work, said planning ministry officials. They said the LGED is now proposing increasing the project cost by 64 percent to Tk 6,457.19 crore.

Planning ministry officials said no feasibility studies were carried out for about 100 bridges. "So, when officials went to the sites to construct the bridges, they found discrepancies in terms of the height, width and approach roads of many of the bridges to be built," said a planning ministry official.

Documents prepared for the Ecneec meeting show that the project officials want more allocation for various reasons, including enforcement of new rate schedule and hike in land acquisition fees.

They also need to pay consultants and staffers for another three years, so the project cost would increase further, added the documents.

India to send 20 lakh vaccine shots as gift

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According to the contract, Beximco is purchasing the vaccine for \$4 per shot. However, each shot will cost the government \$5 as it would pay Beximco 80 cents in service charge and 20 cents for delivering the doses to the vaccination centres.

Covishield was developed by the University of Oxford along with British drugmaker AstraZeneca. Pune-based Serum, the world's largest vaccine manufacturer, partnered with Oxford University to manufacture it in India.

MINISTER'S MEET THE PRESS
Minister Zahid at Dhaka Reporters' Unity said the government would provide treatment if a vaccine recipient shows adverse effects.

The adverse effects from the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine are mild and people

taking the shots should agree to this.

He stressed that the first shipment of the three crore doses would reach the country by January 26.

The government plans to inoculate 50 lakh people each month after launching the programme.

Asked about the cost, the minister said, "As per the agreement, we know we and India will get the vaccine for the same price."

Meanwhile, the government submitted necessary documents to the World Health Organization to receive eight lakh shots of the Pfizer-BioNtech vaccine.

"We have the storage needed for these. We are going to arrange additional storage through Unicef."

Some 42,000 health workers are being trained for the vaccination

programme, he said, adding that there would be more than 300 vaccination points in the capital.

"The vaccine will be given only in hospitals and diagnostic centres... The government will bear the expense for treatment [of possible adverse impacts]."

Private companies will be allowed to import more Covid-19 vaccines and supply them in the local market, he said.

"The price for imported vaccines will be fixed following government procedures. A protocol is being prepared in this regard."

Journalists will get the vaccines as front liners. Around 25,000 journalists will be inoculated as a priority group, according to a health directorate proposal.

Practise tolerance, shun differences

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speech at the inaugural sitting of the first session of the new year. The cabinet earlier approved the president's speech.

The new year session is also the 11th session of 11th Jatiya Sangsad.

Yesterday, the House went into the session around 4:30pm, with Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury in the chair. The sitting was arranged following health safety rules and maintaining social distancing amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

In his speech, President Hamid said despite innumerable obstacles, the relentless efforts of the government have been sustained for ensuring participation of the people in consolidating good governance, practice of democracy and implementation of development programmes.

He read out an abridged version of his speech in order to save time. The full speech was tabled in parliament.

Hamid said all-out efforts have been continued by the government to uphold the rule of law in the country. Good governance has been established through swift delivery of verdicts in various sensational cases, including the

Bangabandhu murder case.

Mentioning that all sectors of Bangladesh's economy have been negatively affected by the impact of the pandemic, the president said the prime minister issued multi-dimensional directives, including a 31-point guideline on how to combat the situation, through virtual conferences.

"Not a single person in the country was left unfed during the pandemic period because of free distribution of food, sale of rice for Tk 10 a kg and distribution of cash money."

Bangladesh has been tackling the coronavirus situation successfully due to the well-timed and courageous decisions taken by the PM, Hamid added.

The president described the government's various success in different sectors, including in economy, health, agriculture and communications.

About the health sector, he said the government has made unprecedented progress in ensuring healthcare services for all. "The biggest achievement of the government has been successful control of Covid-19 in recent times."

Couple meet tragic end

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husband worked for a civil engineering construction firm while Maya was a barista at Hotel Lake Castle in Gulshan-2.

The duo lived with their daughter, Afra Anjum, in a small rented two-room flat in Dakshinkhan's Mollartek. Every morning before work, they would drop Afra off with Maya's mother and sister for the day.

"Akash was a village boy from Faridpur and Maya was a city girl. Eight years ago, Akash came to Dhaka to do computer training, right after his SSC exams, and that is where he met Maya and they started talking," said Akash's aunt Rupa Begum.

"Maya's family was pressuring her to marry someone else, so they [Akash and Maya] eloped. They had not even sat for their HSC exams then. I gave them shelter in my house because Maya's family refused to accept their marriage," continued Rupa.

Both completed their HSC exam after marriage while working full-time jobs.

"They had just bought the motorcycle 11 months ago to have an easier commute," said Maya's sister Reshma. "They had also just gotten their daughter admitted to playgroup three days ago, and were waiting for her school to start."

Their Facebook profiles reveal

whimsical posts about their dreams and aspirations, their love for each other and their precious daughter.

Meanwhile the bus's driver is on the run, said SI Imran.

According to media reports, Ajmeri Glory Paribahan buses killed a mother and her daughter in Gazipur in February 2020, and two more people in Gazipur in 2018.

Maya's father Manik Miah filed a case with the police station, demanding justice.

"Their bodies have been taken to Faridpur to be buried together. They were so in love when alive, that they should be together after death," said their aunt Rupa.

Mob beats 'robber' to death in Sitakunda

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, CIG

An alleged robber was beaten to death by a mob in Chattogram's Sitakunda upazila early yesterday.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Additional Superintendent of Police (Sitakunda) Ashraf Karim said a gang of robbers broke into two houses in Muradpur union of Sitakunda in the middle of night and looted valuables.

As the robbers were leaving the area, locals rushed there hearing the victims screaming for help. They managed to catch two robbers, said the ASP.

Locals then beat them up, leaving them badly injured. At one stage, one of them managed to flee, Ashraf added.

On information, police went to the spot and sent the injured robber to a local hospital where doctors declared him dead.

The body was sent to Chattogram Medical College Hospital morgue for an autopsy.

The identity of the alleged robber could not be confirmed till last night.

7 year-old boy killed as mosque wall caves in

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

A seven-year-old child died of his injuries at a local hospital on Sunday night, hours after part of an under-construction boundary wall of a mosque fell on him in Megharam village of Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila.

The victim, Akash Islam, was a resident of the same village.

Moghlat Union Parishad Chairman Habibur Rahman said Akash, along with some other children, was playing beside the boundary wall around 5:30pm on Sunday.

All of a sudden, part of the wall fell on the child, leaving him seriously injured.

Locals rushed Akash to Lalmonirhat Sadar Hospital where he died around 8:45pm, the UP chairman added.

Later, the hospital authorities handed the body to the victim's family members.

Escaping Covid curbs, tourists flock to Dubai

AFP, Dubai

As much of the world tightens lockdowns to stem coronavirus, Dubai has flung its doors open, branding itself as a sunny, quarantine-free escape -- despite a sharp rise in cases.

While mask-wearing and social distancing are strictly enforced, life in the tourism-reliant emirate looks much like normal, with its restaurants, hotels and mega-malls open for business.

Images of sports stars and television personalities enjoying life at beach clubs and cocktail bars have flooded social media -- sometimes to disapproval back home.

Emirates, which restored its network to about three quarters of pre-pandemic levels, is again operating A380 super-jumbos -- the world's largest commercial airliner -- ferrying in visitors from Britain and Russia.

16 more die

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Directorate General of Health Services. Around 473,173 patients -- 89.56% -- have recovered so far.

The number of infections 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.

World facing

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will be paid with lives and livelihoods in the world's poorest countries."

He said even as some countries pronounced reassuring words on equitable access, they were prioritising their own deals with manufacturers, driving up prices and trying to jump the queue.

He said 44 such deals were struck in 2020 and at least 12 have already been signed since the New Year.

"This could delay COVAX deliveries and create exactly the scenario COVAX was designed to avoid, with hoarding, a chaotic market, an uncoordinated response and continued social and economic disruption," he said.

"The situation is compounded by the fact that most manufacturers have prioritised regulatory approval in rich countries where the profits are highest, rather than submitting full dossiers to WHO," Tedros said.

"Not only does this me-first approach leave the world's poorest and most vulnerable people at risk, it's also self-defeating."

"Ultimately, these actions will only prolong the pandemic, prolong our pain, the restrictions needed to contain it, and human and economic suffering."

Tunisia arrests over 600, deploys troops after riots

AFP, Tunis

More than 600 people have been arrested and troops have been deployed after a third consecutive night of riots in several Tunisian cities, officials said yesterday.

The unrest came after Tunisia imposed a nationwide lockdown to stem a rise in coronavirus infections on Thursday -- the same day as it marked the 10th anniversary of dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's fall from power.

Interior ministry spokesman Khaled Hayouni said a total of 632 people were arrested, notably "groups of people between the ages of 15, 20 and 25 who burned tyres and bins in order to block movements by the security forces".

Defence ministry spokesman Mohamed Zikri meanwhile said the army has deployed reinforcements in several areas of the country.

Hayouni said that some of those arrested lobbed stones at police and clashed with security forces.

"This has nothing to do with protest movements that are guaranteed by the law and the constitution," said Hayouni.

"Protests take place in broad daylight normally... without any criminal acts involved," he added.

Hayouni said two policemen were wounded in the unrest.

It was not immediately clear if there were injuries among the youths and Hayouni did not say what charges those arrested faced.

The clashes took place in several cities across Tunisia, mostly in working-class neighbourhoods, with the exact reasons

for the disturbances not immediately known.

But it came as many Tunisians are increasingly angered by poor public services and a political class that has repeatedly proved unable to govern coherently a decade on from the 2011 revolution.

GDP shrank by nine percent last year, consumer prices have spiralled and one third of young people are unemployed.

The key tourism sector, already on its knees after a string of deadly jihadist attacks in 2015, has been dealt a devastating blow by the pandemic.

Tunisia has registered more than 177,000 coronavirus infections, including over 5,600 deaths since the pandemic erupted last year.

The four-day lockdown ended on Sunday night, but it was not immediately known if other restrictions would be imposed.

The army has deployed troops in Bizerte in the north, Sousse in the east and Kasserine and Siliana in central Tunisia, the defence ministry spokesman said.

Sousse, a coastal resort overlooking the Mediterranean, is a magnet for foreign holidaymakers that has been hit hard by the pandemic.

The health crisis and ensuing economic misery have pushed growing numbers of Tunisians to seek to leave the country.

On Sunday evening in Ettadhamen, a restive working-class neighbourhood on the edge of the Tunisian capital, the mood was sombre.

Vote for AL or else

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(January 30). "Select one of them as a commander. The commander will be in command," he added.

The UP chairman said, "Do we have time to be beaten up? It's time to beat up."

He said the AL has fielded a mayoral candidate and the party will take over the post. "We have to elect the mayor in the same way we did while electing our Gabtali upazila parishad chairman."

Contacted, Sajedur admitted that he addressed the meeting. "I delivered the speech to motivate our leaders and activists to run the polls campaign," he told The Daily Star.

Returning Officer of Gabtali municipality election Rawan Jahan, also the Gabtali upazila nirbahi officer, said he got the video footage yesterday afternoon.

"The Swechchasebak League leader

violated the code of conduct of the municipality election by making such statements. A show cause notice will be sent to him tomorrow [today] asking him to explain why action will not be taken against him," the returning officer said.

Meanwhile, BNP mayoral candidate Saiful Islam yesterday said the Swechchasebak League leader has actually "announced the election result before it is held" by ordering local party men to bar voters from casting ballots for other candidates.

"We think Awami League doesn't believe in democracy. The party does not allow people to exercise their voting rights," said Saiful, also the immediate past mayor of Gabtali municipality.

Five candidates, including the BNP and AL nominees, are contesting the mayoral election.