

BANGLADESH UPDATE

454
New cases in 24hrs

5,34,407
Total cases

8,094
Deaths

4,78,960
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

2,203,966
Deaths

102,183,744
Total cases

INDIA FARMERS' PROTESTS

Fresh clashes raise tensions

Delhi cop hurt; Congress MP Tharoor, 6 journos sued for 'seditious' tweets

AGENCIES

Clashes erupted yesterday between hundreds of opponents and supporters of a major farmers protest that has disrupted the Indian capital for more than eight weeks.

At least one farmer was seen brandishing a sword during the latest unrest to overshadow two months of protests against the liberalisation of farm produce markets. Police fired tear gas and baton charged rival groups to separate them at Singhu border.

Tensions have been building around the farmers' camps since Republic Day on Tuesday, when a tractor rally turned into a citywide rampage which left one farmer

dead and nearly 400 police injured.

The government has deployed thousands of extra police and paramilitaries in Delhi and around the camps since then. One small camp has been closed, as have many roads around the protest sites.

Some local groups have said the farmers should leave. Farmer leaders have insisted their action will go on.

"When we don't have any land left, when we are unable to cultivate any crops, we are going to die anyway," said Bhagwant Singh, a 53-year-old farmer at Singhu.

"At least if we die here protesting, we will be martyrs. We will fight and die for the rights of the people of this country."

Covid vaccines sent

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has transported a total of 25.32 lakh doses from its Tongi warehouse to 28 districts on Thursday and to eight more districts on Friday in compliance with the government list.

"So far we have sent vaccines to 36 districts and the rest of the districts will get the vaccine on time," Nazmul Hassan Papon, managing director of Beximco, said.

He said they would transport the vaccine to 18 more districts today and to the remaining 10 districts tomorrow.

Papon also hoped that the second consignment of vaccine would arrive on time. According to the tripartite agreement, Bangladesh will get 50 lakh doses every month from the SII.

The COVAX programme, led by the World Health Organisation and Gavi offered Bangladesh around four lakh doses of Pfizer vaccine earlier this month.

The alliance has committed to give Bangladesh a total of 6.8 crore vaccine shots.

"Vaccines are now being dispatched to districts and from there those will be sent to designated hospitals and upazilla health complexes. Hopefully, vaccines will reach all districts by January 31," Abul Bashar Mohammed Khurshid Alam, director general of Directorate General of Health Services, told The Daily Star yesterday.

He also said people have been registering for vaccination and hoped that the mass vaccination programme will start smoothly.

He also urged people to register online for getting the vaccine.

On Thursday, vaccines were sent to all districts of Barishal and Mymensingh divisions and some districts of Dhaka, Khulna and Rajshahi divisions.

Dr Mohammad Ibrahim Titon, civil surgeon of Rajbari, said they have received 36,000 doses of the vaccine yesterday.

"We have stored the vaccine. We

will be able to start vaccination on the opening day," he said.

Asked how many doses they demanded, he said, "There is no end in demand. We will vaccinate people in phases and there will be no crisis."

Dr AKM Mustafizur Rahman, civil surgeon of Habiganj, said they received 72,000 vaccines yesterday.

"We have enough vaccines. We checked the vials before receiving and there was no problem. We will start vaccinating on time," he said.

It has so far been a smooth process, from the government purchasing the vaccine, piloting it and transporting it to the district level.

Healthcare officials of different districts also told The Daily Star correspondents that they did not have any issue so far in storing the vaccine.

But some The Daily Star talked with said they were behind schedule in training volunteers at the district, city corporation and upazilla levels.

Contacted, Dr Shamsul Haque Mridha, member secretary of the National Vaccination Campaign committee of the DGHS, told The Daily Star yesterday, "Training and orientation of volunteers in all upazilas will be started on Saturday. It will be completed everywhere within days. We have time for this."

Asked about the delay, he said, "In fact, we had to change our plan after receiving the vaccines from the Indian government as a gift. We had no plan to run piloting in five hospitals in Dhaka. We have to change our plan considering circumstances."

According to the National Vaccination Plan of the health ministry, the training and orientation of the volunteers at district, city corporation and upazilla levels was scheduled to be held on January 26 and 27.

Besides, the first-line supervisors and vaccinators were supposed to be trained for vaccination from January 23-26.

Secy-level talks

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Besides the Secretary-level JRC meeting, the countries' Home and Commerce Secretaries would also meet before the March summit.

The decisions were taken at a two-hour Foreign Office Consultations (FOC) meeting, co-chaired by Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Masud bin Momen and his Indian counterpart Harsh Vardhan Shringla, at the Hyderabad House in New Delhi yesterday.

"Both sides agreed to hold the next Home Secretary-level talks, Commerce Secretary-level talks and the Secretary-level meeting of Joint Rivers Commission before the March 2021 Summit," the Indian External Affairs Ministry said in a statement.

The decision to hold the JRC meeting assumes importance as Masud bin Momen had, before leaving for Delhi for the FOC talks, made it clear that Bangladesh was looking forward to the Teesta river water-sharing deal which has been in a limbo for the last decade due to stiff resistance by West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

The Commerce Secretaries meeting would be keenly watched as the two countries are reportedly close to the finalisation of a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement that will allow free two-way trade and services.

At the FOC meeting, which began at 11:30 local time, both sides held a comprehensive review of the progress achieved in the many areas of the bilateral relationship, the statement said.

The discussion also focused on preparations for the forthcoming visit of Prime Minister Modi to Dhaka in March and events relating to the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties between New Delhi and Dhaka.

The two countries noted with appreciation the dose cooperation on Covid-19 related issues, including India's gift of two million doses of Covishield vaccines to Bangladesh in keeping with India's neighbourhood first policy.

Underscoring the importance of the year 2021 in the context of the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Bangladesh, the 50th year of bilateral diplomatic ties as well as the birth centenary of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, both sides decided to further strengthen the ongoing coordination to jointly commemorate these anniversaries.

In this context, both sides expressed their appreciation for the participation of the Bangladesh tri-service marching contingent at India's Republic Day Parade on January 26 and noted the

significance of the event in reminding present generations about the struggle and sacrifices of Indian and Bangladesh forces and peoples during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War.

The FOC meeting expressed satisfaction at the intensity of bilateral exchanges, continuing steadily despite the Covid-19 pandemic and noted the recent meetings that both sides had after the December 17, 2020 Virtual Summit between Hasina and Modi, including the 51st BSF-BGB Director General-level talks in Guwahati on December 22-26, 2020, the technical-level meeting of the JRC on January 6 this year, the first Police Chiefs' Dialogue on January 12, as well as the 19th Secretary-level Joint Steering Committee meeting on power sector cooperation on January 23.

The 2nd India-Bangladesh Consular Dialogue was held on January 28 in New Delhi.

The Bangladesh Foreign Secretary was accompanied by Bangladesh High Commissioner to India Muhammad Imran, Secretary (East) Mashee Shams and representatives from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Commerce and Water Resources of Bangladesh.

The Indian delegation consisted of representatives from the Ministries of External Affairs, Home, Commerce and Industry, Jal Shakti and Finance.

During his stay in New Delhi, the Bangladesh Foreign Secretary will visit the Bagabandhu-Bapu (Mahatma Gandhi) Digital Exhibition currently on display at Vigyan Bhawan and will be interacting with Indian Foreign Service Officer Trainees at the Sushma Swaraj Institute of Foreign Service.

Govt extends

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issued separate statements on extension of closure yesterday. However, Qawmi madrasa will remain outside the purview of the government's directive.

On March 17 last year, the government closed all schools to contain the spread of coronavirus. The closure led to cancellation of exams, leaving academic calendars in disarray.

Both the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education and the Directorate of Primary Education have already sent a guideline to all colleges, secondary schools and primary schools to prepare for reopening by February 4.

A top education ministry official yesterday hinted that there is a strong possibility that the government might finalise the decision regarding the reopening of schools by the second week of February, when the winter season will end in the country.



The age old Kamalapur Station Plaza, which is one of the most recognisable artefacts in Dhaka, is likely to be demolished since the Prime Minister's Office has given its consent.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

PMO gives go-ahead

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A railway official said the station plaza has to be shifted 130 metres northward from its current location to implement the new plan.

After that meeting where both sides agreed to the new plan, Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan told reporters that the existing plaza will be demolished and a similar one will be built to the north as per the new plan that will turn the station into a "true transport hub".

He, however, had said Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina would make the final decision in this regard as the existing plaza, an iconic structure, has to be demolished to implement the new plan.

The BR and the DMTCCL, the implementing authority of the country's first metro rail, were locked in a dispute over the extension design plan of the MRT-6 line.

The MRT-6 line was initially designed as an elevated line from Uttara to Motijheel. In 2019, the DMTCCL planned to stretch the MRT-6 line directly to the railway station following a PM directive.

Although the BR did not oppose the extension, it contested the DMTCCL design for the extension, saying that it would frustrate the BR's plan to turn the Kamalapur station into an MmTH.

The station, in its current location, would be completely covered by the MRT-6 structure if the DMTCCL design is implemented. There would be no option

but to shift the station because even if the existing plan is modified the station will be partially covered by the MRT-6 structure, the BR officials argued.

Even the Japanese ministry of land, infrastructure, transport and tourism wrote to the Public Private Partnership Authority of Bangladesh to change the proposed design.

In the meeting between DMTCCL and the BR, Japan's Kajima corporation -- which is leading the Kamalapur MmTH Sub Working Group -- proposed a modification to the design of the MRT-6 structure, to which both parties agreed, BR officials said.

But as it would still partially cover the station, it was decided to shift the station, subject to PMO approval.

PMO GIVES CONSENT
PMO secretary on December 14 presided over a meeting on the projects to be implemented under the public-private partnership model with government-to-government initiative between Bangladesh and Japan.

Kamalapur MmTH was one of those projects discussed. The minutes of the meeting was sent to the offices concerned in the second week of this month to implement the decisions.

Project Director Monirul Islam Firozi talked about different aspects and challenges of the MmTH project at the meeting, including the agreement BR has reached with DMTCCL over the design of the MRT-6 extension.

The meeting decided that the plan of the Kamalapur MmTH has to be

prepared coordinating the stations and tracks of MRT-1, 2, 4, the proposed subway line and alignment of the Dhaka Elevated Expressway.

The existing building of the Kamalapur station would be shifted further north to give space to MRT-6's scissor crossing for trains to change direction, the meeting decided.

Public Private Partnership Authority will hire consultants to carry out a detailed study to check the overall situation of the project area, it added.

A BR official said although they have got the PMO's consent to shift the station plaza, they would consider two things -- condition of the over 50-year-old structure and MmTH's design -- before taking a decision on whether it would be absolutely necessary to dismantle it.

Kamalapur station was unveiled on July 27, 1968, which also marked the last journey of a train from Fulbaria, with vast paddy fields transformed into one of the most beautiful and modern railway stations in Asia.

Officially known as Dhaka Railway Station, it is now the central and the largest rail station of Bangladesh. The iconic parabolic umbrella structure at Kamalapur was designed by Daniel Dunham and Robert Boughiey.

Architects and urbanists, meanwhile, have been demanding that the authorities build the multimodal hub and carry out any expansion of metro rail keeping the unique structure intact in its current position.

He acted like a mafia boss

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said, when asked whether the JS would initiate measures against the MP.

When asked whether the conviction and sentencing of a lawmaker abroad for such a crime was a disgrace to the nation, Momen said, "Yes, surely it is. It is very sad."

Talking to this newspaper, Deputy Speaker Fazle Rabbi Miah said the JS could not take action against any MP based on news published in the media.

"The speaker will dispose of the matter in line with the constitution and the rules of procedure of parliament after receiving documents and papers on the judgment," he said.

"We will also have to look into whether the MP was awarded punishment on moral turpitude."

Asked to explain moral turpitude, the deputy speaker said the CrPC and the evidence act clearly mentioned what moral turpitude was.

On June 6 last year, Kuwait's Criminal Investigation Department arrested Papul, also the managing director and CEO of Marafic Kuwaitia Group.

He was accused of human trafficking, bribing Kuwaiti officials with millions of dollars to recruit Bangladeshi workers and get contracts for his company, money laundering, fraud related to employment of workers in his company, and violating the residence law.

The others sentenced on Thursday include Kuwait's interior ministry's Assistant Under-Secretary Maj Gen Mazen Al-Jarrah, and Nawaf Al-Mutairi, Hassan Al-Khader and Papul's associate Mohammad Rashidul Islam, a Bangladeshi.

Quoting Arabic newspaper Al Qabas, The Times reported that Papul is estimated to have obtained KD5 million in assets in Kuwait. During investigations, all his bank accounts and that of his company were frozen.

According to sources in Kuwait, Papul went to Kuwait in 1989 as a worker and eventually started working as a recruitment broker and later established companies. He ran four companies involved in providing cleaners through government contracts in Kuwait, employing 9,000 workers.

According to witness accounts in the case against Papul, he was part of an "organised gang" made up of two Kuwaitis and Papul. They used a company to recruit workers from Bangladesh by fraudulent means in exchange for payments ranging between KD2,500 and KD2,700 for each, The Times reported.

The trio occupied sensitive positions in three major companies that brought over 20,000 Bangladeshi workers to Kuwait in exchange for more than KD50 million. Although the company was closed due to legal violations, the workers landed in Kuwait to discover their visas were fake. They were forcibly

employed in another company owned by Papul.

Eleven Bangladeshis taken to Kuwait by Papul testified to the court about the exploitation. They were also charged money for renewing residency visas. They were forced to work against their will for long working hours in inhumane working conditions without wages or were provided with inadequate housing facilities.

"He [Papul] attacked those who objected [his views] and threatened them with false cases. Some workers in the two companies were witnesses to verifying the accusations. They added that they were brought in through a travel agency owned by the accused Muhammad Shahid Islam in Bangladesh," The Times reported.

Some Bangladeshis, who worked as Kuwait correspondents for media outlets in Bangladesh, told The Daily Star that they faced unlawful deportation for reporting on misdeeds of Papul. Papul acted behind the deportation, they alleged.

The Times reported during investigations since June last year, evidence was uncovered that Papul extorted the workers, intentionally hid information and bribed some Kuwaiti officials to facilitate unlawful issuance of work visas.

Initially, Papul denied all the charges against him and his links to the criminal activities, but a search by the Kuwaiti authorities of his residence and companies produced documents revealing his crimes. He then admitted to offering gifts and assisting his friends in "several agencies" who in turn helped Papul complete the company's transactions, according to the report.

During interrogation, Papul reportedly confessed to have provided KD1.1 million by cheque to an official at the Ministry of Interior, one million dinars in cash to another official, in addition to "bags" of millions of dinars in cash to a third official, Kuwaiti media reported.

The Times reported prosecutors heard testimonies from scores of Bangladeshi workers who had been brought into Kuwait by the accused, from Bangladesh, for money. This trading in work visas allowed him to siphon off money to the United States for laundering.

Papul transferred suspicious amounts to the tune of millions of dinars to European and Gulf banks in the days leading to the investigation, as he was preparing to leave Kuwait, after he had learned that his name had appeared in investigations in visa trading, human trafficking and money laundering, the report added.

JS TO ACT AFTER BEING INFORMED FORMALLY
Action regarding Papul will be taken by parliament after the relevant authorities

in Kuwait formally informed the JS Speaker about the matter, said officials of the Parliament Secretariat.

Against this backdrop, questions have arisen as to who is the respective authority, how long it will take to inform the matter to the Speaker and how long the MP will be paid in monthly salaries and other benefits from the government exchequer.

According to the accounts section of parliament, an MP now gets over Tk 1,73,000 per month in pay and perks, meaning Papul received more than Tk 14 lakh since his arrest in Kuwait.

Speaking on the issue, Transparency International Bangladesh Executive Director Dr Iftekharuzzaman told The Daily Star that if the government or the Jatiya Sangsad avoids taking prompt actions, it will only add to the embarrassment caused to the nation by the MP's sentencing.

"Initiatives should be taken immediately to contact the relevant authorities in Kuwait to collect relevant official papers so as to take action against the MP, including cancelling his membership of parliament, as per the constitutional provisions," he said.

"Moreover, the Kuwaiti action should be treated as only the first step in this episode. He and his associates should be brought to justice under the Bangladeshi laws, under which both money laundering and human trafficking are serious crimes," he also said.

Iftekharuzzaman also said any government inaction at this stage would be a message that there are elements within the government and parliament who are determined to sabotage the prime minister's zero tolerance pledge against corruption.

Senior Secretary of the Parliament Secretariat Zafar Ahmed Khan said they were yet to officially know about the sentencing of the MP.

"We came to know about the matter from the media. After getting necessary documents on this issue through the official channel, the Speaker will take necessary measures in this regard in line with the law and the constitution," he said.

Asked, he said the Jatiya Sangsad is to get the documents from the foreign ministry.

According to Article 66 of the constitution, there are several provisions under which an MP shall be disqualified for being a member of parliament.

One of the provisions says, "A person shall be disqualified for election as, or for being, a member of parliament who has been, on conviction for a criminal offence involving moral turpitude, sentenced to imprisonment for a term of not less than two years, unless a period of five years has elapsed since his release."

BANGABANDHU'S BIRTH CENTENARY

Momen invites new US secy of state to visit Bangladesh

STAR REPORT

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen has invited new US Secretary of State Antony John Blinken to visit Bangladesh and attend the celebrations of the Birth Centenary of the Father of the Nation and the Golden Jubilee of the country's independence.

He wrote a letter of congratulation to Blinken, whose nomination as the Secretary of State has been confirmed by the US Senate on Tuesday, just more than a week after President Joe Biden took office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement.

In the letter, Momen underscored that such a visit of the US Secretary of State would further strengthen the multifaceted bilateral relations, and would also provide Blinken an overview of the "miraculous development" Bangladesh has achieved under the visionary leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

He expressed his disposition to work closely with his US counterpart to achieve the two friendly countries' common goals of peace, development, and security for all.

Terming the Bangladesh-US relations as a unique partnership, Momen stressed upon Bangladesh's willingness to work with the new US Administration to further strengthen the ties, address common challenges, and to build on the progress and prosperity that has been achieved.

He also expected that the new US administration will deport Rashed Chowdhury, the fugitive killer of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in the spirit of ensuring justice and rule of law.

Momen further thanked the United States for the strong political support and humanitarian assistance provided for the Rohingya and expected that Joe Biden's administration would work more proactively in the international efforts to resolve the crisis through the safe and sustainable return of the displaced Rohingyas to their ancestral land in Myanmar.

Opining that Bangladesh can be a lucrative destination for new US investment, he stated the Bangladesh government's keenness to have wider US cooperation in the economic arena, especially in the form of trade liberalisation and foreign direct investment.

Bangladesh being the present Chair of the 48-member Climate Vulnerable Forum, Momen expressed deep satisfaction about the return of the US to the Paris Agreement, and hoped that the two countries would work closely to save the planet for the future generation.

Results out today

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of the country that a public examination has been cancelled.

The results will be announced at 10:30am from International Mother Language Institute in the capital's Segunbagicha, according to a statement of the education ministry.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will participate in the programme virtually, added the statement.

Candidates will be able to collect their results from websites and through SMS from 11:00am, Prof Gazi Hasan Kamal, chairman of Mymensingh education board, told The Daily Star.

"We are discouraging students from collecting results from their educational institutions due to the Covid 19 situation," he added.

Examinees can get the results from the education board website <http://www.educationboardresults.gov.bd/> and also from the websites of their respective education boards.

Usually, HSC exams take place in April-May, but it could not take place last year due to the pandemic. On March 17, the government closed all schools to contain the spread of coronavirus. Yesterday, the closure was extended till February 14.

The scheduled HSC and equivalent exams were cancelled on October 7 due to the pandemic. It was decided that students will get their results based on their SSC and JSC results.

The results will be published after coordinating 75 percent of the SSC and 25 percent of JSC-JDC results, Education Minister Dipu Moni told the media earlier.

All 1,365,789 candidates under 11 educational boards will become successful in the exams.

As per the previous laws, there is, however, no provision to publish the results of HSC and equivalent exams without holding tests. On January 24, three separate amendment bills were passed in the parliament, paving the way for publishing results without holding a public exam during a pandemic, epidemic, and act of God.

The bills are the Intermediate and Secondary Education (Amendment) Bill- 2021, the Bangladesh Vocational Education Board (Amendment) Bill-2021, and the Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board (Amendment) Bill-2021.

The amendments have been incorporated in the Intermediate and Secondary Education Ordinance-1961, Bangladesh Vocational Education Board Act-2018, and Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board Act-2020.