

**BANGLADESH UPDATE**

**369**

New cases in 24hrs


**5,35,139**

Total cases


**8,127**

Deaths


**4,79,744**

Recoveries


**2,232,181**

Deaths


**103,263,805**

Total cases

**ROHINGYA REPATRIATION**

# Myanmar positive, UN supportive

*Says foreign minister*

AGENCIES

Myanmar has responded positively towards starting Rohingya repatriation whereas the United Nations has promised continuous support to Bangladesh to collectively address the Rohingya crisis.

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen yesterday said that Myanmar responded positively towards starting Rohingya repatriation with the next round of talks scheduled for the first week of February.

"We got some positive responses. We told them it's an opportunity for you [Myanmar] to take back your nationals," he told reporters after a programme in the capital.

The foreign minister said they provided a figure to start the repatriation and Bangladesh asked Myanmar to begin.

Momen said peace and development in the region would be hampered if the Rohingya issue is not resolved.

He said a director-general level meeting with Myanmar would be held in the first week of February this year.

Myanmar had earlier said they were committed to beginning repatriation of Rohingyas as per the bilateral agreement signed with Bangladesh in 2017.

Myanmar's International Cooperation Minister Kyaw Tin conveyed it to Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen in a recent letter.

The Myanmar minister also said they were committed to ensuring peaceful relations with all neighbours including Bangladesh and resolving any problem peacefully.

Kyaw Tin said they wanted to resolve any bilateral issues with neighbours through mutual partnership.

He hoped to begin repatriation of Rohingyas to Myanmar soon through the tripartite talks held among Bangladesh, Myanmar, and China on January 19.

The two countries will address the relevant issues, including a joint working group meeting with an

expansion that will be held in February first week to prepare the ground for repatriation in the second quarter of the current year.

The China-Bangladesh-Myanmar meeting was chaired by Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui and Myanmar Deputy Minister of International Cooperation Hau Do Tuan led the Myanmar side.

Meanwhile, Secretary General of the United Nations Antonio Guterres has said the UN would continue to stand with Bangladesh and mobilise international support to collectively address the Rohingya crisis and ask Myanmar to create a congenial environment for Rohingya repatriation.

He thanked the government of Bangladesh for supporting the mandate of his office and sought Bangladesh's continued cooperation with his Special Envoy on Myanmar to mobilise further international assistance towards a durable solution to the Rohingya crisis.

He recently wrote a letter to Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen, expressing deep gratitude to Bangladesh for hosting the Rohingya population who fled atrocities and persecution in Myanmar.

The secretary general assured that the UN has renewed its advocacy and support in the Rakhine State and would continue to engage with Myanmar towards creating a conducive environment for the sustainable return of the Rohingyas.

Through the office of the Special Envoy and other UN mechanisms, the UN would continue to work towards creating conducive conditions for return, including full implementation of the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, to find a durable solution to the crisis, the secretary general said.

The secretary general has sent the letter in response to Momen's new year message to him where the Foreign Minister stressed, among others, a more robust and active role of the UN for the commencement of repatriation and a lasting solution to the crisis.



Two district administration staffers taking a case of Covid-19 vaccines to the School Health Clinic on Shamsur Rahman Road in Khulna city yesterday afternoon.

PHOTO: DIPANKAR ROY

## Greed puts lives at risk

FROM PAGE 1

There are 85 large and small slums in the capital, according to the fire service.

Home to around 1.1 lakh people in 30,000 houses, Korail Bosti is spread over 90 acres of government land in Mohakhali.

In Mirpur, the 40-acre Bhasantek Bosti houses around 30,000 people in 4,750 homes and Chalantika Bosti, on 20 acres of khas land, houses 15,000 people living in 3,000 houses.

Around 20,000 people live in 4,000 shanties in Sattola slum while around 13,000 people live in 2,600 shanties in Natunbazar Porabosti in Kalyanpur.

In Korail, at least 20 syndicates, allegedly led by local Awami League men, are involved in providing 15,000 illegal gas and 20,000 power connections to slum dwellers.

Korail slum dwellers also alleged that a local Swachhasebak League leader who controls power connections there have told them to pay Tk 30 more per point from February this year.

In Bhasantek, at least three syndicates are involved in providing around 1,500 gas and 4,750 electricity lines to slum households, sources involved in the illicit trade told this newspaper, and two AL leaders reportedly run the syndicates in Chalantika.

In Sattola slum, at least 10 syndicates are involved in the illicit trade while at least two syndicates run the trade in the Kalyanpur slum.

Md Kausar Ameer Ali, managing director of Dhaka Electric Supply Company (Desco), admitted that power connections at the slums are mostly illegal.

"People live in the slums and they need electricity. On humanitarian grounds, we will not disconnect their lines. But we are trying to figure out how we can provide it in a legal way. We already gave some connections in groups."

Hawkers, shopkeepers, roadside vendors, rickshaw and van pullers, CNG drivers, domestic help and workers in the garments, construction, and transport industries mostly live in the slum shanties, largely made of tin, wood, and bamboo.

Fire officials and experts said faulty electric connections, illegal gas lines, and carelessness of the slum dwellers are some of the main reasons behind frequent fire incidents in the city's densely-populated slums which were built in an unplanned way over the years.

According to the Bangladesh Fire

Service and Civil Defence, 30 fire incidents took place at different slums in Dhaka last year -- among 96 such incidents across the country -- killing at least 10 people.

Since 2017, at least 126 fire incidents took place at different slums in Dhaka and 271 in slums across Chattogram alone -- among 689 such fire incidents in slums across the country.

On average, 39 percent of total fire incidents that took place in the country since 2017 were caused by faulty electric connections, according to fire service data.

While after most such slums fires, many victims allege that these might be acts of sabotage -- fire officials, however, haven't yet found any incidents of sabotage in their investigations.

**FAULTY WIRING, CHEAP CONNECTIONS**

Col Zillur Rahman, director (operations) at the fire service, said slum fires mostly originate from electric short circuits because the wires are of very low quality and installed in an undisciplined way.

"The ingredients of the slums are like food of the fire. In winter, it gets drier. When fire catches, it spreads like wildfire," he said.

During a recent visit to Sattola slum in Mohakhali, where 98 shanties and shops were gutted in a fire in November last year, these correspondents found that some slum dwellers were rebuilding their shanties and shops using the same low-quality wiring and plastic pipe gas lines.

A similar situation was seen in Kalyanpur slum.

"This is dangerous, the way low-quality electric connections are hanging haphazardly and gas connections are through cheap pipes. We frequently find leaks in gas connections and have to repair these," said Mahbubur Rahman, a resident in Sattola for the last six years.

An electrician by profession, he said households pay Tk 180 for each light bulb, fan, and television, and Tk 600 each for a fridge and a gas connection.

Residents of the slum say many households have electric heaters too. Illegal, risky gas connections, too, remain a serious threat to slum households as the quality of distribution lines and the way they are installed fall far below the standard.

The syndicates connect stainless steel pipes to the main lines of Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company, to siphon off and distribute

to slum houses using galvanised iron (GI), plastic, and even rubber pipes.

Such pipes were seen laying around haphazardly in the slum as well as hanging precariously overhead. These correspondents at first took those to be water lines but locals confirmed that these were for supplying gas.

Fire service officials said fires are difficult to bring under control and spread quickly because of the web of illegal gas pipes across the slums.

The slums are also crisscrossed by substandard electric wires supported by bamboo and wooden poles and having multiple joints in places. A number of such poles are in a dangerously tilted position.

From the main utility poles, electricity is transmitted to slum houses through this risky wiring. Any leak can lead to accidents, especially in the rainy season.

Contacted, Rafiqul Islam, assistant commissioner of Gulshan Division where the Korail and Sattola slums are located, told The Daily Star that they haven't received any complaints regarding illegal gas and power connection in the slums so far.

Mofizur Rahman, councillor of Dhaka North City Corporation's ward-19 and also president of Awami League in the ward, said some political leaders are using the signboard of the party and providing these connections with the help of some unscrupulous Titas, Desco, and police officials.

"However, we are working to make the process legal so that poor slum dwellers in Korail get gas legally," he added.

A senior official of Titas, requesting anonymity, said under existing law they cannot supply gas to the slums as these settlements are khas land and the houses have no holding numbers.

Also, if the government provides gas connections at a cheaper rate, people from villages will through the city's slums, which will ultimately increase the [gas supply] burden," he also said.

He added they often conduct drives at slums to sever illegal connections.

Sources said Titas conducted a drive in Korail slum last month to sever the illegal gas connections -- but within three days of the drive, the syndicates had managed to get the connections up and running again by "managing" the officials.

The Daily Star ran a report in August 2019 when officials of police, Titas and Desco had made similar comments, but no changes are yet visible in the supply and quality of utilities in the slums.

## Law enforcers, admin helped ensure AL victory

*Says defeated BNP mayor candidate of CCC polls; demands re-election*

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Shahadat Hossain, defeated mayor candidate in Chattogram City Corporation polls from the BNP, has demanded a re-election, alleging that verdict of the people was "robbed" by various government agencies and law enforcers with the help of the administration.

He also said they would sue the Election Commission for its "failure to keep its promise of a fair election".

At a press conference at his party office Nasimon Bhaban in Chattogram yesterday, the BNP leader alleged that the election was rigged and his activists and supporters were intimidated and attacked.

He read out a four-page statement there.

Shahadat said the chiefs of police, Rab and various agencies were present in Chattogram on the election day. Together, they ensured the Awami League candidate's victory in the polls. Many police officers cited instruction from the high-ups when they drove out the BNP's polling agents from the voting centres, he alleged.

He further alleged that the EC did not keep its promise, based on which they contested the election. He said they would file a lawsuit against the commission.

"We had placed some conditions before the Election Commission, which assured us of a fair election. But we saw the opposite scenario on the voting day. That's why we will file a lawsuit against the EC," he said.

"I visited various polling centres where I saw six to seven percent votes were casted till 2:00pm. But the voter turnout was shown at 22.52 percent. How was it possible to cast such a number of votes in the last two hours?" he asked.

The voting ended at 4:00pm.

Abnormality was found in voter turnout at different centres, he said, adding that in some centres, the turnout was only one percent, and it was up to 94 percent in some other centres.

"Two polling centres in a building showed a huge contrasting result. In one centre, the turnout was 84 percent and 1.64 percent in another centre, Shahadat mentioned.

He alleged the presiding officers did not sign the ID cards of BNP polling agents.

"Outsiders from various upazilas were taken to the city before the election day and the outsiders intimidated, attacked BNP supporters and activists to drive them out from their respective areas," alleged Shahadat, also president of Chattogram city BNP.

He also mentioned that four BNP councillor candidates -- Hasan Liton, Ismail Hossain Bali, Mohammad Azom and Yeasin Chowdhury Asu -- were detained the night before the election day.

Of them, police filed a case against Bali who was later sent to jail by a court.

Shahadat said the EC proved the allegation brought by 40 eminent citizens of the country true. They alleged that the EC destroyed the electoral process in the country.

Abul Hashem Bakkar, general secretary of Chattogram city BNP, party councillor candidates who contested the polls were present, among others, at the press conference.

AL mayoral candidate Rezaul Karim Chowdhury won by a landslide in Wednesday's CCC polls marked by violence, low voter turnout and the capture of scores of polling centres by ruling party men.

## University student

FROM PAGE 1

When the victim's physical condition deteriorated, the students took her to the hospital, the OC added, quoting the case statement.

OC Abdul Latif further said the family received the body yesterday after the autopsy.

Morgue sources said they kept the victim's viscera sample to determine whether she was raped while police said the cause of death will be known after the autopsy report is prepared.

**ACCUSED DIES**

Meanwhile, one of the accused in the case -- Arafat, 28, who also drank with them, died at City Hospital in Mohamadpur yesterday, Harun-Ur-Rashid, deputy commissioner of Tejgaon Division, told The Daily Star around 2:15am today.

He also said their another friend also left the restaurant immediately after falling sick. Police are searching for a youth who took the alcohol to the restaurant, the DC said.

The incident took place three weeks after a 17-year-old O-level student was raped and murdered by her friend at a flat in the city's Kalabagan area, as per the case statement, sparking a huge outcry across the country.

**STONE EXTRACTION FROM RIVER**

## Sylhet DC apologises to HC

*Court does not accept*

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Sylhet Deputy Commissioner M Kazi Emdadul Islam yesterday apologised unconditionally to the High Court for not complying with its order over giving permission to the highest bidder for extraction of stones from the Lava river in the district.

The HC bench of Justice Mozibur Rahman Miah and Justice Kamrul Hossain Mollah refused to accept his apology as he could not give a satisfactory explanation to his act.

During hearing a contempt of court petition, the bench ordered DC Emdadul to further appear before it on February 28 in connection with the issue.

Petitioner's lawyer Sheikh Awsafur Rahman Bulu told The Daily Star that the HC on October 1, 2020, directed the DC of Sylhet to award the work of

stone extraction to the highest bidder Nizam Uddin.

But, the DC did not act in line with the HC order.

Nizam Uddin then filed a contempt of court petition with the HC against DC Emdadul for not complying with the order.

Following the petition, the HC on January 7 this year issued a contempt of court rule asking the DC to explain in 15 days why he should not be punished for violating its order.

The court also asked the DC to appear before the HC bench yesterday in connection with the rule.

Yesterday, the DC appeared before the HC bench and prayed for exoneration from the rule, the lawyer said.

Lawyer Awsafur Rahman, however, could not say details of the case and about the lawyer for DC Emdadul.

## Hasina-Modi in-person

FROM PAGE 1

held in New Delhi while Commerce Secretary-level, Home Secretary-level and Shipping Secretary-level talks will be held in Dhaka.

The two countries are currently working on four to five MoUs to be signed during the Summit meeting and there is a possibility to increase the number of bilateral documents with inputs from four secretary-level meetings.

Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen shared the plans during a briefing at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs yesterday afternoon on his New Delhi visit.

He said Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar is likely to visit Bangladesh before the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Earlier on December 17 virtual meeting, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina thanked her Indian counterpart for accepting her invitation to visit Bangladesh in person in March 2021 to join the celebrations on the occasion of 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's Independence and 50 years of Bangladesh-India diplomatic relations.

Bangladesh and India described the year 2021 as historic in their bilateral relations as they would be commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Liberation War and the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Bangladesh.

Bangladesh prime minister requested the Indian side to consider Bangladesh's proposal to name the historic road from Mujib Nagar to Nodia on Bangladesh-India border as "Shadhinota Shorok" commemorating the historic significance of the road during Bangladesh's Liberation War.

The road is likely to be inaugurated during the PM-level meeting, said the Foreign Secretary adding that Feni Bridge is also likely to be inaugurated.

On trade issues, Masud Momen said the bilateral trade between the two countries crossed the USD 1 billion mark and there is scope for further

expansion of trade addressing the barriers.

The Commerce Secretary-level talks will discuss ways to remove all kinds of barriers to higher trade volume between the two countries, he said, adding that the meeting will be an important one.

Masud Momen said the air bubble arrangements in the coronavirus situation have been extended between Bangladesh and India until 30 April or resumption of regular flights, whichever is earlier.

"We saw its effectiveness." He said the two countries are in discussions to resume tourists and students visa soon, at least on a limited scale.

Responding to a question, the Foreign Secretary said Bangladesh requested early operationalisation of the Motor Vehicle Agreement under the framework of Bangladesh-India-Nepal (BIN) to start with as Bhutan is yet to complete their internal process.

Bangladesh also requested India to consider allowing the use of new land and rail routes and land ports via India for facilitating connectivity between Bangladesh and Nepal as well as Bangladesh and Bhutan.

Secretary (East) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mashfee Binte Shams was also present at the briefing.

The Foreign Secretary-level talks between Bangladesh and India were held on Friday at the Hyderabad House in New Delhi.

The Bangladesh delegation was led by Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen while the Indian side by Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla.

High-profile officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Water Resources and Ministry of Commerce of Bangladesh formed the Bangladesh delegation.

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

## Those who needed it most got the least

FROM PAGE 1

the central government further made their job difficult.

In Indurkani upazila, a list of 4,000 people was sent to the central government for the one-time cash relief of Tk 2,500 -- but only 60 percent of those on the list received relief, found the study team.

In Pirojpur, there were 1,60,000 beneficiaries of rice and cash. Even though all of the relief was distributed, local government officials interviewed said they failed to reach all the people in need.

Field-level workers also told researchers that they did not get sufficient time to make a list of everyone in need of relief.

For the cash transfer, upazila-level officers were given a week to make lists of beneficiaries, but had to abide by strict conditions, such as the phone number of the beneficiary needing to match that of the mobile money transfer account.

Since not everyone had access to digital financial services, this proved to be a problem, and the district-level target of listing 75,000 beneficiaries could not be reached, found researchers. "Furthermore, the process

took a month," said Towfiqul Islam Khan, Senior Research Fellow at CPD.

"People who came back to the villages from the cities during lockdown were also left behind when it came to distribution of relief," said Khan.

Meanwhile, the researchers found that the district coordination team did not have data about the number of beneficiaries in each upazila, and what the upazila-wise allocation of relief is.

Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya, distinguished fellow of CPD, stated that relief distribution should be dependent on poverty levels instead of population sizes.

"However, the level of coordination and data needed to accomplish this is often absent," he said.

A similar situation was observed in the distribution of free Boro rice seeds to farmers seeking relief.

Even though free seeds of Boro rice, worth Tk 76 lakh, were given to "card-holding" farmers affected by the cyclone, the last time the list of card holders was updated was in 2014.

Field-level officers told researchers that only 60 percent of the total relief demand for seeds could be met with

the current allocation.

"The relief packages could not be distributed to farmers without identity cards," said Khan.

Even though the number of card-holding farmers in Pirojpur Sadar and Nesarabad was fewer, those two upazilas got more of the allocated amount of free seeds.

"There needs to be a local level database for relief-seekers. This needs to be accessible not just centrally, but locally," said Khan.

"There also needs to be initiatives to incorporate those too poor to have phone numbers," he added.

SM Rezaul Karim, minister of fisheries and livestock and lawmaker of Pirojpur Sadar, said, "Even though we did not fulfil expectations, we can say that we tried."

A total of 2,60,000 families got relief of some sort during the pandemic, said the deputy commissioner of Pirojpur, Abu Ali Md Sajjad Hossain.

Dr Mustafizur Rahman, distinguished fellow at CPD, moderated the event. Dr Fahmida Khatun, executive director of CPD, and Dr Dipankar Dutta, the country director of Oxfam in Bangladesh, also spoke at the event.