

**BANGLADESH UPDATE**



**470**

New cases in 24hrs



**545,424**

Total cases



**8,395**

Deaths



**495,498**

Recoveries



**2,524,304**

Deaths



**113,809,255**

Total cases

## Global bodies call for full investigation

DIPLomatic CORRESPONDENT

"Should not have been detained in the first place"

Global rights bodies and campaigners of freedom of expression have said writer Mushtaq Ahmed should not have been detained in the first place and that his death raises serious questions about the treatment of prisoners unjustly held in Bangladeshi jails.

In statements issued yesterday, they also called for full and immediate investigation into the death of Mushtaq, dropping of charges against cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore, and move to repeal the Digital Security Act.

"Mushtaq Ahmed's death raises serious questions about the treatment of prisoners unjustly held in Bangladeshi jails, which the government has a responsibility to answer promptly and fully," said Karin Deutsch Karlekar, PEN America's director of Free Expression at Risk Programs.

"Not only should Ahmed have never been detained for his independent expression and critical views in the first place, his unjust death under the authorities' watch immediately followed his complaints of torture at the hands of the security forces," she said.

PEN America demanded that the relevant authorities investigate Ahmed's death and cease all efforts to prosecute cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore under similarly "draconian and politically-motivated charges".

Mushtaq was pronounced dead on arrival on Thursday night at Gazipur's Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmad Medical College Hospital, after being brought there from Kashimpur High Security Jail.

He and political cartoonist Kishore had been held since May last year for allegedly violating the country's Digital Security Act by spreading rumors and misinformation about the coronavirus pandemic on Facebook.

Mushtaq and Kishore were only formally charged under the DSA earlier this month.

The circumstances and cause of Mushtaq's death are not yet known.

Jyotirmoy Barua, Mushtaq's lawyer, said neither he nor Mushtaq's family members had been contacted by authorities informing them of the death. He learned about it via social media, he told the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), a New York-based global body for freedom of expression.

On February 23, Mushtaq appeared in court and was in decent health,

according to what Jyotirmoy told CPJ.

At that court appearance, Mushtaq expressed concern about the health of Kishore, CPJ said in its statement.

"At the hearing, Kishore passed a note to his brother stating that he had been subjected to severe physical abuse while in police custody, sustaining a serious leg injury and ear injuries that have led to infections due to lack of adequate medical care."

"The note did not describe the exact nature of the abuse," according to the sources CPJ interviewed.

"CPJ repeatedly called the Bangladesh Prison Headquarters and the Inspector General of Prisons, Md Mominur Rahman Mamun, for comment, but no one answered.

"CPJ also emailed the prison headquarters, but did not receive any immediate response," the organisation added in its statement.

"Mushtaq Ahmed's death in a Bangladeshi prison, where he never should have been detained in the first place, is a devastating and unconscionable loss," said Aliya Ifukhar, CPJ's senior Asia researcher.

"The Bangladesh government must allow an independent inquiry into how Mushtaq Ahmed died and move immediately to repeal the Digital Security Act, which it has used repeatedly and unjustly against journalists."

Brad Adams, Asia Director of Human Rights Watch, in a statement also said the writer should not have been detained in the first place.

He said authorities should immediately open a transparent and independent investigation into the circumstances of Mushtaq's death.

The government should account for why posting satire about the ruling Awami League on Facebook could amount to the equivalent of a death sentence.

"They should heed calls from the UN and others to immediately release cartoonist Kishore Ahmed and others currently held in custody just for speaking out," Brad Adams said.

Amnesty International's South Asia Campaigner Saad Hammadi, said, "Mushtaq Ahmed's death in prison is the effect of the authority's cruel practice of prolonging detention of people without trial or conviction.

"We are witnessing the worst form of repression that a law like the Digital Security Act can bring on a person. "No one should have to die solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression."



Students stage a demonstration in the capital's Shahbagh intersection yesterday protesting the death of writer Mushtaq Ahmed in jail custody and demanding cancellation of the Digital Security Act.

PHOTO: STAR

## Unacceptable

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Michael Kumir Thakur. His book "Kumir Chasher Diary" was published in November 2018, and he was working on another book. He was critical, on social media, of the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

On May 6 last year, Rapid Action Battalion arrested him at his Dhaka home for "spreading rumours and carrying out anti-government activities". The charges were filed under the DSA and he had been in Kashimpur High Security Jail-3 in Gazipur since August 20.

The other arrestees in the DSA case are: Ahmed Kabir Kishore, a cartoonist; Didarul Islam, a member of politico-civic organisation called Rashtrachinta; and Minhaj Mannan Emon, managing director of BLE securities and shareholder-director of Dhaka Stock Exchange.

Mushtaq fainted Thursday evening. He was then taken to Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmad Medical College Hospital, where doctors declared him dead.

He was 53.

CONDEMNATION, PROTEST

Since the news of Mushtaq's death spread, people from all walks of life took to social media to vent. Many brought out processions early yesterday.

A "funeral prayer" without the body was organised in the capital around 4:30pm, demanding justice for Mushtaq and that the DSA be repealed.

Urging the prime minister to bury the "black law", Gonoshasthya Kendra Founder Zafrullah Chowdhury said, "The killer of Mushtaq is no one but the government.

"Everyone involved in [formulating and implementing] the Digital Security Act is involved in this murder," he said at the programme, organised by Bangladesh Chhatra Odhikar Parishad, in front of the National Museum in Shahbagh yesterday afternoon.

Dhaka University's International Relations Prof Tanzimuddin Khan said, "The Digital Security Act is not only choking freedom of speech but is also taking people's lives.

"Getting bail is a lawful right of a defendant. The state sends murderers and looters to Bangkok overnight but doesn't spare those who speak for justice and the people of the country."

## Home from prison but to be laid to rest

FROM PAGE 1

newspaper that she and Mushtaq's aged parents asked the Rab men in plainclothes when he would return as they were whisking him away around 1:00am.

The Rab men replied that they would send him back after a little while following some questioning.

On May 8 last year, Mushtaq was made accused in a case filed under the controversial Digital Security Act with Ramna Police Station in the city and since then he had been in jail.

"I met him inside prison. We had a chat and he said that he was supposed to be free after quizzing. However, that did not happen," said Didarul Islam, a member of politico-civic organisation called Rashtrachinta, another arrestee in the case who is now currently on bail.

Denied bail six times, Mushtaq passed away on Thursday to be the first man to die in custody after being arrested under DSA, triggering widespread protests and condemnations.

He was buried at the Azimpur Graveyard last night after a Namaz-e-Janaza at Minar Mosque in Lalmatia.

Nafisur said when Mushtaq collapsed in jail, her blood pressure was recorded at 40/20. "It was very low. Then jail hospital authorities administered a steroid injection. Then he was sent to Shaheed Tajuddin Medical College and Hospital."

Nafisur, himself a physician, also

Junaid Saki, chief coordinator of Gono Sanghati Andolon, expressed solidarity with the protest and said, "The murder of Mushtaq proves that this government is not the government of the masses. This state has turned into a murderous state and the independent institutions of this state are being used to control the people."

Blaming the prime minister and the home minister for the death of Mushtaq, former Ducus VP Nurul Haq Nur said, "If we are not organised and united today, our situation will be like that of writer Mushtaq and there is no scope for denying that."

DU law Prof Asif Nazrul also joined the protest and blamed what he termed the black law for the "killing" of the writer.

Later, a procession was brought out from the Central Shaheed Minar premises where protesters held placards and banners and chanted slogans, demanding justice for Mushtaq.

Around 6:45pm, members of several left-wing student groups brought out a torchlight procession from TSC and were heading towards Shahbagh.

As the procession was crossing the Public Library area, police intercepted it, leading to a clash between the demonstrators and law enforcers.

Later in a statement, Samajtantrik Chhatra Front claimed that around 40 protesters were injured in the police attack. At least five other demonstrators were also detained, it said.

Mamun-ur-Rashid, officer-in-charge of Shahbagh Police Station, said, "The demonstrators hurled brick chunks at us. Six to seven policemen were injured."

Police said they detained two. Earlier, at another protest, leaders of Samajtantrik Chhatra Front also blamed the government for Mushtaq's death and held a rally in front of Raju Memorial Sculpture in Dhaka University.

"Writer Mushtaq has died in police custody. It is a killing and the government is responsible for it," said Al Kaderi, president of the Front.

Leaders and activists of another left-wing student group blocked Shahbagh intersection around 11:00am, demanding justice for Mushtaq.

"Mushtaq's lawyer appealed for bail after his health worsened ...

said, "If necessary support was given to him [Mushtaq] during the transfer between the two hospitals, he could have survived."

Earlier, the body of the imprisoned 53-year-old writer was handed over to his family members and relatives after inquest and autopsy at the Shaheed Tajuddin hospital morgue.

Hospital authorities said Gazipur Executive Magistrate Wasiuzzaman Chowdhury prepared the inquest report while Dr Shafi Md Mohaimen, head of the forensic medicine department at Shaheed Tajuddin hospital, completed the autopsy.

Wasiuzzaman said initially there were no visible or mentionable signs of injuries on his body. However, details would be learnt after receiving the autopsy report.

Dr Shafi said Mushtaq was brought to the hospital dead and apparently there were no injury marks on his body. Samples collected for viscera and chemical tests will be sent to Dhaka.

Mushtaq's cousin Nafisur Rahman, while waiting at the hospital to receive the body, told journalists that the post-mortem has been done and before receiving a report he has nothing more to say.

Other relatives and acquaintances who went to the morgue said the writer might not have died if he had been out of jail. The death is a great loss to the family and friends, they added.

Later Mushtaq died. This government has enacted the Digital Security Act to silence dissent," said Zahid Sujon, general secretary of Chhatra Federation.

Meanwhile, Human Rights Forum Bangladesh, a platform of the country's 20 leading rights and development organisations, said writer Mushtaq's death was a consequence of the DSA's misuse.

Issuing a statement, the forum demanded that the cause of death be revealed through a fair and neutral probe. It also demanded that the probe findings are made public.

Besides, it demanded an immediate amendment to the act and release of cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore.

In a separate statement, Ain O Salish Kendra termed the DSA a "contradictory" act and said it is "contradictory" to freedom of press and freedom of speech guaranteed by the constitution.

ASK said the way Mushtaq and Kishore were detained under the act and imprisoned for long has stirred up debate and discussions.

This also created a kind of fear among journalists, cultural activists, writers, researchers and mass people, which impacted negatively on freedom of the press and freedom of speech, it said.

"Undoubtedly, Mushtaq's death will fuel the fear," it added.

Besides, nine left-leaning organisations, including Jatiya Mukti Council and Manabdhikar Shongskriti Foundation, protested the death of Mushtaq, terming it a "murder".

POLICE FOIL BNP PROCESSION

A torch procession brought out by the BNP demanding justice for Mushtaq was foiled by the police in the capital's Banani yesterday.

Talking to The Daily Star, the party's Assistant Office Secretary Syed Emran Saleh Prince claimed that 30 BNP men were injured as police charged truncheons on them.

He said some 150 BNP leaders and activists had brought out the procession from Banani kitchen market area around 7:00pm.

Contacted, Barhan Uddin Rabbani, sub-inspector of Banani Police Station, said the BNP men took out the procession blocking a street.

On information, police went there and dispersed them, he said, claiming that no one was injured in the incident.

"I may face another case for talking before the media."

Gazipur online activist Anwar Hossain, also the convenor of Bangladesh Nagarik Adhikar Sangrakkhan Parishad, who is facing two cases under the DSA, said the state cannot avoid the responsibility when a free thinker dies in custody.

Meanwhile, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal said an enquiry committee would be formed to look into the death of Mushtaq in custody and necessary actions will be taken if needed following the autopsy report.

"The IG prison told me that the writer suddenly felt sick and was treated in the jail hospital. Later, he was taken to Shaheed Tajuddin hospital as his condition deteriorated and he died there," he also said, while talking to reporters after a programme in Chattogram.

Syed Bayazid, sub-inspector of Joydebpur Police Station, said an unnatural death case has been filed in connection with the passing of Mushtaq.

## 11 more die, 470 get Covid

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh's novel coronavirus caseload climbed to 545,424 yesterday after the health authorities detected 470 new cases in 24 hours till the morning.

With 11 newly recorded Covid-19 deaths, the fatality count now stands at 8,395.

The mortality rate is 1.54 percent, a handout from the Directorate General of Health Services said.

Bangladesh reported its first novel coronavirus cases on March 8 last year and the first death on March 18.

So far, 4,018,268 tests have been carried out, including 15,032 in the same 24-hour period.

"The daily infection rate jumped to 3.13 percent and the overall rate stands at 13.57 percent," the DGHS said.

On Thursday, the daily infection rate was 2.63 percent which was 2.65 percent the previous day.

Meanwhile, the health authorities reported 743 recoveries in the 24-hour period, taking the total number of recoveries to 495,498 or 90.85 percent of the total recorded cases.

## DSA: the law

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Can the freedom of an individual be left just at the whims of the police?

With due reverence and respect for the judiciary we ask, shouldn't the fact that a person has been in jail for nine months be a reasonable ground for granting bail? In refusing bails six times, were the fundamental rights of the accused, guaranteed by the constitution, ensured?

Then comes the question what did Mushtaq actually do that had him landed in prison in the first place? He made some Facebook posts and shared some other posts critical of the health ministry and some other government measures. Where is the crime here? The charges brought against him include running a campaign against the Liberation War, Father of the Nation, National Anthem, etc but the investigators provided no proof of any kind. After nine months, we still have no idea what he actually posted.

Even if we accept that for whatever reason the law enforcers felt the need to arrest him, how can we accept that he was incarcerated for nine months without showing any cause for his detention? Not only that, we have reasonable grounds to believe that he suffered physical and mental cruelty. Is this how we should treat a citizen who has no previous criminal record or record of any breach of law?

We may deny till we froth in the mouth but we are guilty of the most grievous violation of human rights against Mushtaq Ahmed. It is not enough for the home minister to say that he spoke against the government and the state without any proof of his "crime".

There are many other prisoners now languishing in jail with similar accusations. We demand that they be immediately released. We demand that the repressive DSA be immediately amended to prevent its abuse which has become so widespread now. It is the DSA that is maligning the image of Bangladesh, not those who are being punished under it.

The DSA was jailing people, now its misuse is killing people.

## Reckless driving

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The fitness certificate of the London Express bus expired on November 23 last year, said sources at Bangladesh Road Transport Authority.

Asked how a bus could run without a valid fitness certificate, Sheikh Masud Karim, assistant superintendent (Sylhet circle) of highway police, said it was difficult for police solely to control unfit vehicles. Rather, it needs coordinated efforts from all government bodies concerned to stop this.

The deceased are Ena Paribahan's bus driver Manzur Ali, 38, its conductor Salman, 30, helper Jahangir Hossain, 30, London Express bus driver Shah Kamal, 45, and bus passengers physician Imran Khan Rome, 38, Nadim Ahmed Sagar, 19, of Dhaka, Nurul Islam, 50, of Brahmanbaria, and Rahima Khatun, 30, of Sunamganj, said BM Ashraf Ullah Taher, additional deputy commissioner (media) of Sylhet Metropolitan Police.

The injured were undergoing treatment at Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital. Of them, condition of four was critical.

## 13 envoys

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independent enquiry into the full circumstances of Mr. Mushtaq Ahmed's death."

The statement said they would continue to engage with the government on their governments' wider concerns about the provisions and implementation of the DSA, as well as questions about its compatibility with Bangladesh's obligations under international human rights laws and standards.

The signatories to the statement are Canadian High Commissioner Benoit Préfontaine, Danish Ambassador Winnie Estrup Petersen, EU Ambassador Rensje Teerink, French Ambassador Jean-Marie Schub, German Ambassador Peter Fahrenholtz, Italian Ambassador Enrico Nunziata, Dutch Ambassador Harry Verweij, Norwegian Ambassador Espen Rikter-Svendsen, Spanish Ambassador Francisco de Asis Benitez Salas, Swedish Ambassador Alexandra Berg von Linde, Swiss Ambassador Nathalie Chuard, UK High Commissioner Robert Chatterton Dickson and US Ambassador Earl R Miller.

## Dhaka seeks UN assistance

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undergoing to create livelihood options for the Rohingyas.

Starting from December last year until now, more than 10,000 Rohingyas were relocated to the island in Noakhali.

The government says it planned relocating the Rohingyas to Bhasan Char to ease congestion, cut crime rates, and save the environment in the Cox's Bazar camps where about a million Rohingyas reside.

The UN has sought to send a technical team for assessment of the facility, but that has not been done yet.

Bhasan Char has not yet been under the Joint Response Plan, a yearly budgeting for the Rohingyas, prepared by the UN and other international agencies.

A UN official and two western diplomats recently said they cannot provide humanitarian assistance for the Rohingyas in Bhasan Char before technical assessment of the facility.

Momen, who is currently visiting the USA, during a virtual meeting with Guterres on Thursday, discussed coronavirus pandemic, climate change and Rohingya issue.

Guterres lauded Bangladesh for sheltering the Rohingyas, tackling of Covid-19 and agreed with Momen that Covid-19 vaccination should be treated as "global public good".

Foreign Minister Momen said Bangladesh would continue to work together with UN to achieve climate ambition and build resilience in preparation for the COP 26 in Glasgow this year.

In response, Guterres promised pursuing the donors to allocate 50 percent of proposed climate funds for adaptation strategies.

Foreign Minister requested the UN

## Vaccination in Asia gains pace

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Rollouts in Asia also gathered momentum as Hong Kong and South Korea began their mass vaccination programs yesterday.

Both places were among the first to experience outbreaks after the coronavirus spread from central China early last year, but have kept infections comparatively low.

South Korea plans to inoculate 70 percent of its population within seven months while Hong Kong aims to vaccinate all adults by the end of the year.

And after months of supply problems and friction, the EU said Thursday it was confident in meeting its goal of vaccinating 70 percent of adults by the end of the summer.

A Dutch court yesterday upheld an appeal by the government against a lower court's order to scrap a controversial coronavirus curfew, saying the cabinet had not overstepped its brief, reports AFP.

Japan will end a coronavirus state

of emergency early in some regions as the pace of infection slows, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said, less than five months before the pandemic-postponed Tokyo Olympics are due to begin.

"THINK ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE" The coronavirus has killed more than 2.5 million people worldwide, with over 113 million known infections, and vaccine rollouts have been patchy.

Most of the 217 million doses administered globally have gone to wealthier countries, and among those struggling with shortages is Brazil.

The South American nation crossed a quarter-million death toll on Thursday as it battles a devastating second wave of infections.

The coronavirus has hit especially hard in Brazil's impoverished "favelas," among indigenous communities and in the Amazon rainforest city of Manaus, where there have been haunting scenes of mass graves and patients suffocating to death with no oxygen.