

BANGLADESH UPDATE **407** New cases in 24hrs **5,45,831** Total cases **8,400** Deaths **4,96,107** Recoveries **GLOBAL UPDATE** **2,533,240** Deaths **114,206,000** Total cases

ROHINGYAS STRANDED AT SEA

We're under 'no obligation' to accept them

Says Momen, expects India or UNHCR to host them

REUTERS, Dhaka

Bangladesh is under "no obligation" to shelter 81 Rohingya refugees adrift for almost two weeks on the Andaman Sea and being assisted by neighbouring India, said Bangladesh foreign minister AK Abdul Momen.

India's coast guard found the survivors and eight dead crammed on a fishing boat and were trying to arrange for Bangladesh to take them, Indian officials said on Friday.

While feeding the refugees and giving them water, India was not planning to take them ashore.

But Momen told Reuters late on Friday that Bangladesh expects India, the closest country, or Myanmar, the Rohingyas' country of origin, to accept them.

"They are not Bangladesh nationals and in fact, they are Myanmar nationals. They were found 1,700 km (1,100 miles) away from the Bangladesh maritime territory and therefore, we have no obligation to take them," said Momen, who is in the United States.

"They were located 147 km (91 miles) away from Indian territory, 324 km (201 miles) away from Myanmar," he said by phone, adding that other countries and organisations should take care of the refugees.

Indian foreign ministry officials were not immediately available for comment.

New Delhi did not sign the 1951 Refugee Convention, which spells out refugee rights and state responsibilities to protect them. Nor does it have a law protecting refugees, though it currently hosts more than 200,000, including some Rohingyas.

More than 1 million Rohingya refugees from predominantly Buddhist Myanmar are living in teeming camps in Bangladesh, including tens of thousands who fled after Myanmar's military conducted a deadly crackdown in 2017.

Traffickers often lure Rohingya refugees with promises of work in Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia.

The United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, expressed alarm this week over the missing boat.

NO 'GLOBAL CONTRACT' TO AID REFUGEES

The refugees have been drifting in international waters after leaving southern Bangladesh on Feb 11 in the hope of reaching Malaysia.

Yesterday, they were under the aid and surveillance of India as officials were holding talks to return them to Bangladesh.

The boat, which sailed from the massive Cox's Bazar refugee camp, was carrying 56 women, eight girls, 21 men and five boys.

Many of the survivors, according to Indian officials, were sick and suffering from extreme dehydration, having run out of food and water after the boat's engine failed four days into their journey.

"Has Bangladesh been given the global contract and responsibility to take and rehabilitate all the Rohingya or boat people of the world?" Momen said. "No, not at all."

Momen said the UNHCR should also take responsibility as around 47 people on the boat hold ID cards from the UNHCR office in Bangladesh stating that they are displaced Myanmar nationals.

"If (the refugees) are UNHCR card holders, why did they allow traffickers to take their card holders to drift on the high sea leading to death?"

UNHCR officials were not immediately reachable for comment.

India fixes Covid vaccine jab price at Rs 250 max for private hospitals

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India yesterday announced a ceiling price Rs 250 per dose of Covid-19 vaccine to be administered by private hospitals as the country aims to exponentially expand the ambit of its inoculation drive from tomorrow.

However, the government Covid vaccination centres will offer free vaccination for all with the Indian government bearing the full cost of the jabs and their administration, reported our News Delhi correspondent.

The pricing of the vaccine administration at private hospitals was taken after Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan yesterday interacted with Health Secretaries of states of the vaccination of age-appropriate groups through a video conference.

The ambit of India's nationwide Covid-19 vaccination drive, launched on January 16, is set to include people above the age of 60 and persons aged between 45 and 59 with comorbidities.

There are more than 10,000 private hospitals in the country that are cleared to give out vaccines apart from all government hospitals and health centres.

Those over 60 will have to only show their identification with age while those over 45 with chronic illnesses will have to get a form signed by a registered medical practitioner, reported NDTV.

The country has halted vaccinations this weekend to upgrade software used to coordinate its campaign, as it prepares to widen coverage beyond the 1.15 crore health and front-line workers immunised since January 16.

Use non-lethal weapons

FROM PAGE 1

"India assured us of using that type of weapon and their sincere effort to bring down the border killing to zero," he said.

He further said that they have discussed in the meeting to improve the relationship in the future between two countries and India assured to exchange cooperation and support.

Kamal further said that they have thanked the Indian government for their support during the Covid-19 period.

"India provided some vaccine as a gift and we have bought some vaccine," he said.

It should need to be mentioned that India has assured to bring down the border killing into zero in different level meetings with Bangladesh several times earlier.

According to a database of Ain O Salish Kendra, at least 49 Bangladeshi citizens have been killed along the India-Bangladesh border by Indian Border Security Force in 2020.

The rights body said at least 15 people were killed in 2018 while the number rose to 43 in 2019.

In the first month of this year, one Bangladeshi was shot dead by the BSF, the data added.

In the meeting, both Secretaries reiterated their commitment to further expand and strengthen cooperation in the security and border-related issues, according to sources.

An official, who attended the meeting, told The Daily Star that they have informed India that yaba pills are now entering from their country to Bangladesh.

In response to it, India said that they did not produce Yaba. Myanmar produced the pills and they may use India for transit. "But India assured that they will remain alert," said the official.

India further asked Bangladesh to install a thermal scanner in every flight that goes to the country so that it can be checked very carefully about carrying any lethal weapons, according to sources.

In response to it, Bangladesh said that they have a flight connection with many other countries and thus it is not possible to install the scanner with the flight.

It was the 19th home secretary-level talk between Bangladesh and India. The meeting was scheduled to held on last year but it postponed for Covid-19.

The Indian delegation was supposed to visit Bangladesh but it finally held virtually for the pandemic, according to ministry officials.

Jahangir Alam, additional secretary (political and ICT) of the home ministry, told The Daily Star that India discussed for early completion of fencing along the Indo-Bangla border.

"We informed the Indian delegates that we would look into it," he said.

A high official of the ministry, present in the meeting, said that they also raised the smuggling of Phensedyl into Bangladesh and India responds that they use it as their cough syrup and what can they do if anyone uses it for addiction.

After the meeting, the Indian home ministry also issued a press release that reads that during the meeting.

India and Bangladesh attach the highest importance to their bilateral relations.

Both sides reaffirmed not to allow the territory of either country to be used for any activity inimical to each other's interests. Both sides appreciated the cooperation between the two countries and the action taken to address the menace of terrorism and extremism effectively.

The effective functioning of the Coordinated Border Management Plan to control the illegal cross-border activities was appreciated by both sides.

Both sides agreed to further enhance the level of cooperation to prevent the smuggling of Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN) and contraband, reads the Indian ministry release.

Bangladesh appreciated the assistance provided by India in the field of training and capacity building for various security agencies, the release added.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina addresses an online press conference as the United Nations made its final recommendation for Bangladesh's graduation from LDC status. Her sister Sheikh Rehana was beside her at the Gono Bhaban during the event yesterday.

PHOTO: PID

All credit goes to people: PM

FROM PAGE 1

milestone achievement possible.

The PM said being the daughter of the Father of the Nation, she felt proud of this achievement as she herself remained engaged in the process of development strides.

"UN Committee for Development Policy reviews the issue of a country's graduation from LDC based on income per capita, human assets, and economic and environmental vulnerability," Hasina said.

In continuation of Bangladesh's fulfillment of these criteria in the first triennial review meeting of the CDP in 2018, Bangladesh also met all the three criteria this year for graduation from LDC to a developing country, she added.

Highlighting various economic indices, the PM said Bangladesh's GDP now rose to \$330.2 billion, and export income to \$40.54 billion, while foreign reserves already reached \$44.03 billion.

Besides, Bangladesh has already been self-reliant in food, fish, egg, meat, and vegetable production, while it is the third country in the world in terms of paddy production, she said.

The premier said today's Bangladesh is not what it was 12 years ago. Ninety-nine percent people have been brought under electricity coverage, digital services have been expanded up to the marginalised people in villages, and a revolutionary change has taken place in the ICT sector through Bangabandhu Satellite, she said.

"Considering all these achievements, Bangladesh is now a changed country in the world."

Talking about the novel coronavirus pandemic, Hasina said the year 2020 was a critical year not only for Bangladesh but also for the entire world due to pandemic.

She, however, mentioned that the government has been able to keep the national economy moving by taking various steps like giving financial assistance and stimulus packages to affected groups.

The PM said the vaccination drive has already begun across the country with a total of 28,50,940 people getting vaccinated as of Thursday.

3CR MORE SHOTS TO BE BROUGHT HOME

Responding to queries from journalists, Hasina said the government was carrying out the vaccination campaign so that everyone can take shots as per the WHO guidelines.

"I've already instructed [the authorities] to bring home another three crore doses of vaccines. We are taking steps so that the second doses are available with the completion of the first-dose vaccination."

The PM said the government was taking measures so that no one was left unvaccinated.

She said she has not yet taken the Covid-19 vaccine, but would take it for sure.

"I will surely take the vaccine, but I want the people of the country to take it first. If one life can be saved with my vaccine, that's the big achievement. Isn't it?"

Hasina said she wants to see first how many people can be brought under the vaccination coverage. "We have a target. We will provide vaccine up to that level. If any vaccine dose is left after that, I will take my one."

The premier also said if any country is unable to produce the vaccine, then Bangladesh will do that. "I have already asked the pharmaceutical companies, which are capable of producing vaccines, to get ready. We're looking for bringing the vaccine seed."

She said she has asked the teachers and others involved with educational institutions to take vaccine as the government is trying to resume academic activities very soon.

Asked about the "magic" behind keeping economic activities vibrant alongside keeping people safe during the pandemic, Hasina said it was not a magic at all. "It is the sincerity and our responsibility to the country and its people."

The premier expressed her firm optimism that Bangladesh would soon be established as a developed, prosperous and dignified country at the world stage if the pace of development continued.

The youngest daughter of Bangabandhu, Sheikh Rehana, was also present at the press conference.

Earlier, Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal handed the UN recommendation to the PM at the Gono Bhaban.

TIMELINE

1960s: LDC concept originated

1971: UN introduced LDC category Some 25 countries listed as LDCs

1975: Bangladesh listed as LDC

2011: LDC Conference held in Istanbul Istanbul Program of Action (IPoA) to reduce LDCs by half by 2020 Bangladesh committed to implement IPoA

2018: National Task Force formed to implement roadmap for graduation Triennial review of UN CDP Bangladesh met all criteria

2018-2021: UNCTAD prepared vulnerability profile of Bangladesh UNDESA prepares an impact assessment

2021: Bangladesh meets graduation criteria for second time UN CDP recommends Bangladesh for graduation

2026: Bangladesh formally graduates to developing country

Bangladesh reaches a milestone

FROM PAGE 1

recommendation at a briefing on Friday after the second triennial review of the LDC category of UN CDP. The five-day review meeting began on February 22 at the UN Headquarters in New York.

Bangladesh has met, for the second time, all the three eligibility criteria for the graduation involving income per capita, human assets index (HAI), and economic and environmental vulnerability index (EVI).

Myanmar and Lao People's Democratic Republic also met the graduation criteria for the second consecutive time. Nepal met the criteria in 2018. The UN CDP, however, deferred the decision on Myanmar and Timor-Leste to the 2024 triennial review, Taffere Tesfachew said.

In the briefing, he also said they would take some other measures considering the fallouts of the Covid-19 on the economy of the newly graduated countries. He also said they would analyse at the 2024 triennial review if the extension was needed.

They will also improve monitoring systems, pay special attention to Covid-19 impacts, and alert ECOSOC of action whenever needed.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina formally announced the graduation status of Bangladesh yesterday.

"This achievement is an outcome of our relentless planning, hard work and efforts over the last 12 years. The people of this country have made it possible. We have only provided the people with policy support from the government," Hasina said at a virtual press conference which she attended from the Gono Bhaban. It was her first press conference in the last 11 months.

As per their schedule, the UN CDP completed its final round of assessment on Bangladesh based on the country's economic data up to 2019.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) had made a separate report on Bangladesh's economic vulnerability profile following the Covid-19 fallout.

The UN CDP has given the final recommendation based on the UNCTAD report and a position paper of Bangladesh government that was submitted to the UN committee earlier for assessment.

The UN CDP in its second triennial review assessed the economy of Bangladesh and found a strong fulfillment of all three required conditions for the graduation.

Bangladesh was well ahead in the gross national income (GNI) criterion: its per capita income was \$1,827 in 2019 against the threshold of \$1,222.

In the HAI criterion, the country's score stood at 75.4 points, well above the requirement of 66. In the EVI, a country's score has to be less than 32. Bangladesh's score was 27.3.

The prime minister said the country's per capita income was 1.7 times higher than the required threshold. The per capita income is now \$2,064, she said.

Although the concept of the LDCs originated in the late 1960s, the first group of LDCs was listed by the United Nations back in 1971. LDCs are usually low-income countries confronting severe structural impediments to sustainable development. While there were 25 countries in the list of LDCs in 1971, the number is 47 now.

Bangladesh was first listed as an LDC in 1975. So far, a total of five countries have graduated from the LDC status. These are - Botswana (1994), Cape Verde (2007), The Maldives (2011), Samoa (2011) and Equatorial Guinea (2017).

When Bangladesh was included in the LDC group in 1975, the poverty rate of the country was 83 percent. In 1981-82, the figure was 74 percent.

The country's poverty rate declined to 20.5 percent in 2019 from 40 percent in 2005, according to data from the Bangladesh position paper. Similarly, the extreme poverty rate also declined sharply to 10.5 percent in 2019 from 25.1 percent in 2005, the paper said.

However, different studies said the poverty rate has increased a bit because of the fallouts of Covid-19.

"The current Bangladesh and the same country in an era ago are not the same. Today's Bangladesh is a changed Bangladesh," Hasina said at the press conference.

Unrest over any death undesirable

FROM PAGE 1

Political parties and human rights bodied came down heavily on the government saying the government is using DSC to gag those criticizing the government.

In response to a question that her government is facing huge criticism at home and abroad due to DSA, the prime minister said, "When we have built a digital Bangladesh, it is our responsibility to provide digital security."

During the question-answer, a journalist wanted to know about the Prime Minister's comment as her government is facing criticism due to harassment of journalists regarding the Digital Security Act.

In response, she said, "We have to fulfill this responsibility so that no one -- from the youngest children to the youth of our country -- goes astray in the digital sphere or gets involved in militancy, terrorism, or any other activity that is harmful to the country."

That is why it is essential to provide digital security along with developing a digital Bangladesh, she said.

Sheikh Hasina said, "I don't want to talk any more about this. But I will say that those who are criticising, will continue to do so. But are you noticing something? Who is criticising the most?"

Hasina also said that it is her government's responsibility to provide digital security so that none can do any work which will harm the country or the country's people.

Saying that she is 75 years old and got involved in procession and took to the streets from her school life back in 1962, she said, "That's why I know more or less all the people of the country. I know who says what and why."

In another question about DSA, the PM said it is a matter of relativity whether the law is being misused.

"I think law takes its course and it will. No one will be punished in a trial if s/he does not commit the crime."

PM said we should avoid such activities which cause harm to the country and the people.

In response to a question on the recent documentary of Qatar-based television channel Al Jazeera, PM said she does not want to make any reaction or want to say anything about it.

"Because it is the country's people who will judge what a television channel says or does, it is the country's people who will judge -- how much true or baseless it was."

The PM also said, "I will tell the country's people don't bother about it [Al Jazeera report]. Bangladesh is going ahead and will go ahead. We can go forward braving those."

Hasina also said, those who did not want Bangladesh's independence, those who killed the Father of the Nation, those who wanted to kill me, turned the country into an arena for arms smuggling and corruption -- how will they accept the progress of Bangladesh? They must try to discredit the country."

The prime minister added, "We have nothing to worry about. My politics do not depend on what a channel says. My politics is to work for the people."