

BANGLADESH UPDATE



515
New cases in 24hrs



5,47,316
Total cases



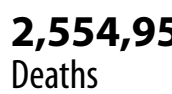
8,423
Deaths



8,98,691
Recoveries



2,554,953
Deaths



115,133,714
Total cases

BNP RALLY IN RAJSHAHI

High security, transport strike trouble people

ANWAR ALI, Rajshahi

Police yesterday beefed up security in Rajshahi division centering a rally of the BNP, causing interruption in road communication and immense sufferings to people.

Seeking anonymity, multiple members of the bus owners' association in the division said policemen urged them not to operate any bus on the roads.

Police, however, denied the allegations and claimed that the transport workers called for a strike.

Contacted, Golam Ruhul Quddus, additional deputy commissioner of Rajshahi Metropolitan Police, said, "Three levels of security have been ensured to keep the law and order situation normal."

Due to the BNP rally, venue-centric security has been put in place, adequate numbers of police have been deployed, and patrols have been arranged at important places in the city, he said.

Meanwhile, the BNP leaders and activists alleged that the police forced them to hold the divisional rally at a

small enclosure of city's Nice Convention Centre premises and that they were obstructed on the way to the rally.

Due to the strike that began Monday, the inter-district road communication in all eight districts of Rajshahi division and communication with the rest of the country remained snapped for the second day yesterday.

Chapainawabganj resident Nazma Begum came to Rajshahi with her children to see a doctor. She was unable to find a bus for her way back.

"I have been sitting in the terminal since morning. No buses are available. It will be a great problem if we don't get a bus".

Babu, a mason from Paba upazila, was waylaid by the police at Nawdapara in the morning.

"I had to walk a long way through other thoroughfares to go to the city. Many of my villagers returned home without a job," he said.

BNP leader Tabith Awal said he was stopped in Puthia upazila at 1:00pm on his way to the rally.



Five girders of an under construction bridge on Pagla-Jagannathpur-Raniganj-Aushkandi regional highway in Sunamganj's Jagannathpur upazila collapsed Sunday night. Officials of the construction company, MM Builders and Engineers Ltd, claimed that the accident happened when a hydraulic jack broke during the installation of a girder on a pier. The Road Transport and Highways Division has formed a four-member committee to investigate the incident.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Daily rate of vaccination declining

7 more die of Covid, 515 get infected

MOUDDUD AHMED SUJAN

The number of people being vaccinated every day has been dropping over the last three days, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) data.

Yesterday, a total of 1,14,680 people were vaccinated countrywide, while the number was 1,16,300 the previous day. On Sunday, a total of 1,25,752 people were vaccinated.

With the latest figures, the total number of people vaccinated rose to 33,41,505. At least 45,30,820 people have registered to get the vaccine as of 5:30pm yesterday.

While health officials said they would need more time to reach the first month's target of 70 lakh people vaccinated, experts said the government should go for door-to-door online registration support and strengthen the campaign.

"People are considering registration process as a burden. Besides, distance of the vaccine centres is also a major cause for poor response. There is a need for door-to-door registration service in addition to setting up vaccination centers in remote areas," Prof Ridwanur Rahman, an infectious disease specialist told The Daily Star yesterday.

In the first week, between February 7 and 14, on an average 1.29 lakh people were vaccinated daily while 1.86 lakh registered for getting the vaccine every day. In the second week, between February 15 and 22, the average was

2.34 lakh and 2.46 lakh.

But in the third week, between February 23 and March 1, the daily average dropped to 1.54 lakh and 1.28 lakh.

"We observed that the response from the low-income people is very poor while it is not satisfactory among the middle-and-upper-class too," Mushtuq Hussain, member secretary of the Publicity and Communication Committee for Covid-19 vaccination campaign, told The Daily Star yesterday.

COVID-19 DAILY UPDATE

The positivity rate of Covid-19 has declined yesterday compared to the previous day.

Against a total of 15,325 tests conducted yesterday, the positivity rate was 3.36 percent, which was 4.31 percent the day before.

Seven more people died from Covid-19 in 24-hours ending at 8:00am yesterday, said another press release from the DGHS.

With the latest fatalities, the total number of deaths has reached 8,423. The death rate was 1.54 percent.

At least 515 new infections were recorded in the same 24-hour period, taking the total number of infected people in the country to 5,47,316.

At least 894 Covid-19 patients have recovered during the same period. The total number of recoveries now stands at 4,98,691 and the recovery rate is 90.98 percent.

Among the seven deceased, five were males.

HC slams ACC for delays in probe

FROM PAGE 1

hearing a bail petition of Mohammad Ali, former general manager of BASIC Bank's Shantinagar branch, in a case filed by the ACC.

The ACC filed the case with Dhaka's Paltan Police Station on September 23, 2015, against Mohammad Ali and some others on charge of embezzling Tk 50 crore from the bank.

The HC bench granted bail to Mohammad Ali, who was shown arrested in the case on December 12, 2018, ACC's lawyer Khurshid Alam Khan told The Daily Star.

He said Mohammad Ali cannot be released from jail as he is arrested in 12 other cases involving around Tk 300 crore.

During the hearing yesterday, ACC

lawyer Khurshid told the HC that the ACC has so far examined 2,600 witnesses in connection with 56 cases filed over the BASIC Bank scams and recovered stolen Tk 3,100 crore.

The ACC has been maintaining the "follow the money policy" in line with the advice of Asia Pacific Group, an anti-money laundering regional body of 41 countries, including Bangladesh, in order to recover the misappropriated money.

The court said the "follow the money policy" is against the reality in respect to this case.

Khurshid Alam Khan said the ACC has recovered around Tk 20,000 crore from corrupt people and deposited it with the state coffer in the last five years.

Three high-profile

FROM PAGE 1

India's West Bengal on March 26, as part of the celebrations of Bangladesh's golden jubilee of independence.

The rail connectivity between the two cities had been suspended since 1965.

"It would be a symbolic plying of the train, but passengers may not be able to start regular journeys at this moment due to the pandemic," a railway ministry official, who wished to remain anonymous, told this correspondent.

He said the two premiers will also hold a meeting on bilateral cooperation. Ahead of the summit, Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar is scheduled to visit Dhaka and hold a meeting with Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen tomorrow, foreign ministry officials said.

The two ministers would be finalising the agenda of the meeting of the two prime ministers, a foreign ministry official told this correspondent yesterday.

All issues, including water, trade and connectivity, border killings, will be discussed during the meeting, the official said.

A water secretary-level meeting between India and Bangladesh is likely to be held before Modi's visit, but officials could not confirm the date yet.

"We would like to see the minister-level meeting of the Joint River Commission of India and Bangladesh," a foreign ministry official said, preferring not to be named.

Ahead of the summit-level meeting, home secretaries of the two countries held a virtual meeting last week. Indian Commerce Secretary Anup Wadhawan is scheduled to hold a meeting with Bangladesh Commerce Secretary Md Zafar Uddin on March 7-8 in Dhaka.

Maldives President Solih will be visiting Bangladesh on March 17-19. Details of his visit are yet to be finalised but a foreign ministry official said Bangladesh may sign two MoUs with the Maldives.

The Maldives is home to some 90,000 Bangladeshis and it wants to recruit skilled professionals, mostly in the healthcare sector, from Bangladesh. Bangladesh also wants to establish a direct shipping link to increase trade and investment.

As climate vulnerable countries, the Maldives and Bangladesh also want to work together in the global forums, officials said.

Nepalese President Bhandari will be visiting Bangladesh on March 22-23.

Bangladesh wants to sign an MoU to establish a Joint Commission with Nepal as part of improving trade and commerce, a foreign ministry official said.

"We will strengthen our relations with neighbours and other countries of the world as we mature as a nation and develop our trade, commerce and connectivity," the official said.

During the visits, the heads of the states and/or governments will hold meetings and join different events, and preparations are underway, the official said.

It's now cash for work

FROM PAGE 1

The depleting stock and the failure to procure sufficient quantity of paddy directly from the growers forced the government to pay cash under the Test Relief and Food for Work programmes, they said.

"We are giving cash this year, but we may go back to [the usual method of payment] grain again next year," Food Secretary Mosammat Nazmanara Khanum told this newspaper yesterday.

Paying cash under such programmes helps prevent pilferage and irregularities, she noted.

"It's a good thing, but it is not possible to give money all the time. We have to buy crops from farmers to encourage them."

The government procures from farmers so that they get a fair price for their produce, the secretary added.

Mustafizur Rahman, a distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), welcomed the government decision.

A good sum is spent and a significant amount of time is wasted on storage and logistics for providing foodgrains under these programmes, he said.

"We hear about problems regarding this all the time. I think it's a right

decision to give money."

Mustafizur is of the opinion that the payments should be made through digital platforms to check pilferage.

PROCUREMENT GOALS MISSED

The Directorate General of Food sought to procure 19.5 lakh tonnes of Boro paddy and rice from April 26 to September 15 last year. But it could buy only 9.09 lakh tonnes during the period.

It is also going to miss its Aman procurement target this season.

The directorate's target was to procure eight lakh tonnes of grain during the Aman season between November 20 last year and February 28 this year. It, however, could buy only 73,000 tonnes till February 25.

The government failed to achieve the procurement target mainly because it fixed paddy and rice prices lower than production costs at the farm level.

This prompted the government to revise its allocation of foodgrains for various public food distribution systems in the current fiscal year. It reduced the allocation to 24.55 lakh tonnes -- 18.65 lakh tonnes of rice and 5.90 lakh tonnes of wheat -- from 31.35 lakh tonnes, according to food ministry documents.

As of January, around 13.39 lakh tonnes of rice and wheat were

distributed through the government's free and subsidised food distribution programmes.

More than 11 lakh tonnes of foodgrains -- 8.25 lakh tonnes of rice and 2.89 lakh tonnes of wheat -- need to be distributed till the end of the current fiscal year, said the documents.

To replenish its stock of foodgrains, the food department has already decided to import 10 lakh tonnes of rice. It has signed agreements to import rice through international tender and also under government to government (G2G) arrangement.

Food Secretary Nazmanara said the process of importing seven lakh tonnes of rice is underway.

"We have also cut the rice import duty to replenish the reserves," she said.

Mustafizur, however, thinks the move to import rice should have been taken much earlier.

It doesn't matter now whether the government pays in cash under these programmes or imports rice to boost stocks because traders have already got a message that the government is in crisis of foodgrains, he noted.

The traders cashed in on the situation and increased rice prices, said the CPD distinguished fellow.

'Mahbub out to disgrace EC'

FROM PAGE 1

"Observing the trajectory of the [recent] local government elections, I believe that the level playing field required for a multi-party democracy is not being ensured in polls," he said.

The most surprising thing happened in Raozan municipality of Chattogram where the mayor and councillors were elected unopposed. So, all law enforcers and election officials were withdrawn. The same was noticed in the upazila elections in Raozan, he said.

"Better call it a selection, instead of an election," he said.

He also mockingly proposed that the "same model" could be followed across the country where everyone would be elected unopposed.

"This will save money and reduce violence. Besides, the Election Commission will not have to shoulder any responsibility. But if it happens, questions will, however, arise whether the Election Commission is anymore necessary," Mahbub said.

He said a free and fair election would not be possible unless the entire electoral process went through a reform. Without the reform, the electoral management will become almost ineffective. In that case, the standard of the elections will go down even further, he said.

Mahbub said at first he was against the use of EVMs in elections but he changed his stance over several reasons. When the machines are used, no one can cast votes the night before the election,

he said.

"But voter turnout is alarmingly decreasing in elections where EVMs are in use," he said.

Voter turnout was only 25.34 percent and 29.27 percent in the Dhaka north and south city corporations elections. It was 22 percent in Chattogram City Corporation polls.

Responding to the statement, KM Nurul Huda said, "It is Mahbub Talukdar's habit that he would bring a piece of paper out of his pocket and start speaking negatively about the commission. He has been doing this since the day he joined it. Today is no different."

"He [Mahbub] does not see an election where EVMs were used and the turnout was 85 percent ... He has made some political remarks on the occasion of the National Voters' Day."

"Making such statements is possible after going through old papers and finding papers from a dustbin. There, however, lies a question ... whether he [Mahbub] is performing his duties as a commissioner. Is he working for the implementation of the recommendations he is making?" he asked.

"He [Mahbub] does not work in the interests of the country's Election Commission. Rather he works to protect his own interests and fulfil his own motive. He is writing a book and he collects information for it," Nurul Huda said.

In the last couple of years, Mahbub Talukdar had spoken about various

election irregularities. He even walked out of commission meetings and issued several notes of dissent over differences of opinion on various matters.

On several occasions in the past, Mahbub and Nurul Huda publicly differed on different issues.

Ahead of the last parliamentary polls in December 2018, the two engaged in a debate over level playing field in the national election.

On December 17, 2018, Mahbub said the level playing field was absent and the words -- level playing field -- had become meaningless.

The next day, expressing disagreement with Mahbub, the CEC in Rangamati said, "Mahbub Talukdar did not speak the truth. The overall election atmosphere is good."

Yesterday at the programme, three election commission officials Mohammad Alauddin, Yunus Ali and Rowshan Ara Begum were awarded Jatiya Nirbanchan Padak for 2021.

VOTERS NUMBER NOW 11.17 CR

The number of the country's voters has now reached 11.17 crore after inclusion of some 19 lakh fresh voters in the voter list in the last one year, according to the Election Commission's updated electoral roll.

The EC in a statement disclosed the final updated voters' numbers on the occasion of the National Voter Day 2021.

Now the number of the total voters stands at 11,17,20,669 -- 5,65,98,005 male and 5,51,22,223 females and 441 transgender voters, it said.

Some coping better than others

FROM PAGE 1

all these projects are complete.

ADP REVISION

Bangladesh Railway (BR) is implementing the Padma Bridge Rail Link Project to connect the capital to Jashore with a 169km rail line over the under-construction Padma bridge at a cost of Tk 39,246 crore.

China Railway Group Ltd, the contractor for the biggest project of BR, issued a press statement on February 24 alleging that it had not been paid for work done in the last seven months and this was slowing down project implementation.

The contractor claimed that the government owes it \$400 million and the payment delay rendered it unable to buy sufficient construction materials and pay subcontractors and suppliers timely.

The project authorities itself told a railway meeting on February 9 that they were facing fund problems. They sought Tk 1,801.14 crore from the ADP on November 25 but did not get it as of February 9, read BR documents.

According to the revised ADP documents, the annual allocation for the project was Tk 3,684.36 crore but it has been revised to Tk 5,454.86 crore.

Contacted, Project Director Golam Fakhruddin Ahmed Chowdhury said the revised allocation would help them

overcome the situation.

"Actually, we wanted to speed up the project work. So we need more allocation," he said.

Padma Bridge Rail Link project witnessed 37.39 percent overall progress until January.

The Tk 35,984 crore Matarbari power plant is scheduled to be completed by 2023. The original ADP allocation of Tk 3,672 crore for the project was revised to Tk 4,200 crore.

Another project that got additional allocation is the Payra Deep-sea Port project. The original allocation for the project this fiscal year was Tk 700 crore but it would now get Tk 1,151.67 crore.

After the first revision, the project cost rose to Tk 4,516.75 crore and completion deadline was re-fixed to June 2023, one and half years more than the original.

While approving the revision on February 16, the PM directed Payra Port Authority (PPA), the implementing agency, to prepare a detailed work plan involving the government's development agenda.

Allocation for the 2,400MW Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, the biggest single project which is worth Tk 1,13,092 crore, witnessed significant reduction.

The project would now get Tk 10,166.78 crore this fiscal, which is Tk

5,524.35 crore less than the original allocation.

The power plant project made 34.34 percent progress until December last year.

Annual allocation for Padma bridge reduced to Tk 2,099.93 crore. The original allocation was Tk 5,000 crore.

Apart from the pandemic, the much-hyped project faced huge challenge due to strong currents in the Padma river. No span could not be installed for around four months due to this, officials said.

However, installation of the all spans were completed in December last year and the bridge is expected to be opened to the public in June next year.

The overall implementation progress of the project is 84 percent as of January. Allocation for the Chattagram-Cox's Bazar rail line project was cut to Tk 990 crore from the original Tk 1,500 crore.

Project work suffered delays due to the pandemic, that's why the funds could not be utilised, a project official said.

The project has seen 49 percent progress as of January.

The MRT-6, an elevated metro rail from Uttara third phase to Motijheel, saw 56.94 percent overall progress made as of January.

Annual allocation for the project, Tk 5542.83 crore, remained unchanged.

BCL leader hacked to death in Manikganj

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Manikganj

A thana-level leader of Bangladesh Chhatra League was hacked to death in Singair upazila of Manikganj early yesterday.

The deceased is Faruk Hossain Miru, general secretary of Singair unit of BCL.

Faruk, a former vice president of Singair Government College BCL, was heading home on a motorcycle after attending a programme around 1:00am when a group of at least eight youths attacked him, leaving him critically injured, said Shahidur Rahman, joint secretary of Singair Upazila unit Awami League.

He was rushed to the National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopedic Rehabilitation in Dhaka where he breathed his last around 1:00pm yesterday.

Rakibuzzaman, officer-in-charge of Singair Police Station, said they were trying to arrest the attackers.

Before his death, the victim told his family members that upazila unit Sramik League leader Angur Hossain and his younger brother Dulal Hossain, general secretary of Singair Degree College unit BCL, led the attack following a feud over establishing supremacy. Shahidur said quoting the deceased's family.

Angur and Dulal could not be reached for comments.

Govt to ensure

FROM PAGE 1

it has been formulated in order to give protection to the people and state from digital offences, and therefore, there is no question of repealing it.

The minister did not make any comment when queried whether the government will take any measure so that the accused people arrested under the Digital Security Act can easily secure bail from court.

Right after the law minister's made similar comments on another media outlet on Monday, a man was sent to jail in a case under the DSA in Dinajpur, an accused under the act was denied bail in Khulna and journalists formed a human chain in the capital demanding the amendment of the controversial act.

Police arrested Kalidas Dutta, 30, son of Shree Subal Dutta, of Phulbari Upazila in Dinajpur that same night for allegedly spreading fabricated information with ill intentions through a fake Facebook account.

Fakhrul Islam, OC of Phulbari Police Station, said the accused was sent to Dinajpur jail, after he was produced before a local court yesterday afternoon.

Police said two cases have been filed with the station against Kalidas on February 21.

Abul Basar Md Moshuazzaman Reza and Kazim Uddin of the Uttar Sujalpur village separately filed cases against Kalidas for spreading fabricated information, for which they have been facing social humiliation.

The Daily Star could not independently verify the allegations.

Meanwhile, a Khulna court yesterday rejected the bail petition of Ruhul Amin, coordinator of Krishak-Sramik-Jantata Oikya Parishad.

Atiqul Islam, of Khulna Metropolitan Magistrate Court-4, rejected the bail prayers, said Ruhul's lawyer Begum Akhter Jahan.

Police picked up Ruhul from a mess in Khulna city's Gokhali on February 26 and showed him arrested under the DSA. Police also detained Niaz Murshid Dolon, convener of the organisation, from there but released him on Saturday night.

Journalists, under the banner "general journalists", yesterday formed a human chain at Karwan Bazar and demanded that a DSA amendment committee be formed and the judicial commission stop the misuse of the act immediately.

They also demanded the arrest of the killers of journalist Borhan Uddin Muzakkar, who was critically wounded in a clash between supporters of Basurhat municipality Mayor Abdul Quader Mirza and former upazila chairman Mizanur Rahman Badal in Companiganj on