

BANGLADESH UPDATE

606
New cases in 24hrs

5,50,330
Total cases

8,462
Deaths

5,03,003
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

2,602,812
Deaths

117,313,994
Total cases

SWADHINATA PADAK 2021

Nine people, BARC picked

UNB, Dhaka

The government has picked nine individuals and one institution for "Swadhinata Padak 2021" (Independence Award), the highest civilian award in Bangladesh, for their outstanding contributions to the country.

The Cabinet Division issued a notification in this connection yesterday.

Four recipients of the award -- AKM Bazlur Rahman, Shaheed Ahsanullah Master, Brig Gen (ret'd) Khurshid Uddin Ahmed, and Akhtaruzzaman Chowdhury Babu -- have been named

posthumously for their contributions to Independence and the Liberation War.

Dr Mrinmoy Guha Neogi will receive the highest state award for his contributions to science and technology; Mohadeb Saha for literature; Aatur Rahman and Gazi Mazharul Anwar for culture; and Dr M Amjad Hossain for social work.

Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council will receive the award in the research and training category.

Bangladesh has been honouring individuals and institutions with the award every year ahead of Independence Day since 1977.

Foreigners' registration

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under vaccination programme.

"Foreign nationals holding A/A1/A2/FA2/D/ND/M categories of visas will be considered for vaccination in the first phase. The visas must be valid for at least six months," said a circular issued by the DGHS on March 3.

It said starting on March 17, a separate tab will be added to the portal -- surokkha.gov.bd -- for registration of foreigners.

Prof Mijanur Rahman, director (management information system) at the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), told The Daily Star yesterday that all foreign nationals holding the said categories of visas should approach their respective embassies/high commissions/organisations to send their details to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The information to be required include name, passport number, date of birth, nationality, gender, type of visa, visa number, visa expiration date, name of the company and local mobile phone number.

"After the information of the vaccine applicants is sent to the foreign

ministry, it will send the same to the ICT [Information and Communication Technology] ministry. The ICT ministry will enable the system for the foreigners to register," said Prof Mijanur.

After registration, the applicant will receive SMS stating the date of the inoculation. The foreigners can get the vaccine on the date and at the centre they selected while registering, he said.

A foreign diplomat lauded the initiative by the Bangladesh government.

"Bangladesh is one of the countries that began inoculation early. I am happy that the government is now including all foreigners for the vaccination," he told this correspondent.

India has gifted Bangladesh two million doses of Oxford/Astrazeneca vaccines produced by the Serum Institute of India, while the government is importing 30 million vaccines from the same company through Beximco Pharmaceuticals.

Bangladesh will also get 1.28 crore doses of vaccines from the COVAX programme, led by the World Health Organization and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance.

Six held over protesting

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discharging their duties in Shahbagh on February 26.

They are Tamjid Haider, Nozir Amir Chowdhury Joy, Akib Ahmed, Arafat Saad, Nazifa Jannat, and Joyoti Chakravarty.

Four of them -- Tamjid, Nozir, Akib and Arafat -- were released yesterday, while Nazifa and Joyoti will be released today, said Tahsin Mollick, president of Dhaka city unit of Bangladesh Students' Union.

However, no bail petition was filed for ASM Tanjimur Rahman. Court sources said Tanjimur's family appointed another lawyer who did not appeal for his bail yesterday.

On March 3, a Dhaka court sent them to jail after rejecting both remand and bail prayers in connection with the case.

The seven were picked up from a torch procession brought out on February 26 in Dhaka's Shahbagh, protesting the death of writer Mushtaq Ahmed in custody the previous day.

Following a clash between police and protesters during the torch procession, police sued the seven detained protesters along with 150 unnamed others on 10 charges, including attempted murder.

Protesters have been demonstrating in the capital and elsewhere to press

home their demands -- justice for the death of Mushtaq, scrapping of the Digital Security Act and the immediate release of all those imprisoned under the controversial law.

Meanwhile Ruhul Amin, a coordinator of left-leaning Shramik-Krishak-Chhatra-Janata Oikya Parishad, who wrote on Facebook protesting Mushtaq's arrest under DSA and subsequent death in custody, is still jailed under the controversial law.

On February 27, Ruhul was sued under the DSA for trying to destabilise the state, creating social unrest and other reasons.

Mushtaq, 53, and Ahmed Kabir Kishore, 45, a prominent cartoonist, were held in pretrial detention under DSA, following their arrests in May 2020 for Facebook posts and social media communications that were deemed critical of the government.

Mushtaq had been in Kashimpur High Security Jail-3 in Gazipur since August 20. On February 25, he fainted and then was taken to Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmad Medical College and Hospital, where doctors declared him dead.

Coming out on bail on March 4, Kishore alleged that he and Mushtaq were inhumanely tortured while in custody of the Rapid Action Battalion.

It was declaration

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Bangabandhu had uttered twice "Ebarer sangram amader muktir sangram, ebarer sangram swadhinatar sangram (the struggle this time is for our freedom, the struggle this time is for our independence)," she said.

She said Bangabandhu knew that a guerrilla war would take place and for that he asked the countrymen to be ready with whatever they had to face the enemies.

Hasina said Bangabandhu had even given all the directives on how then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, would be run.

She said not a single Bangalee worked without the directives from Dhanmondi-32, then residence of Bangabandhu. "Even when Yahiya Khan came to Dhaka, no Bangalee cook at the President's House worked," she added.

"The President's House was compelled to phone Dhanmondi-32 that the president was not getting cooked food and that until you [Dhanmondi-32] ask the cooks and they would have to eat dried food."

Liberation War Affairs Minister AKM Mozammel Haque and Education Minister Dipu Moni also spoke on the occasion as special guests.

State Minister for Cultural Affairs KM Khalid presided over the discussion and its Secretary M Badrul Arefin gave the welcome address, while Chief Coordinator of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Birth Centenary Celebration National Implementation Committee, Kamal Abdul Naser Chowdhury presented the keynote

paper.

The PM said the Father of the Nation in his March 7 speech had instructed the Bangalees to take preparation for the guerrilla war as the Pakistanis were taking preparation to carry out an attack on them.

Hasina said Bangabandhu had taken up a strategy that the Pakistanis would first launch attacks on the Bangalees, compelling them to retaliate. He took this strategy mainly to get international support for the Bangalees' endeavor to liberate the country from the clutches of the Pakistan occupation forces, she added.

The Father of the Nation had taken up the war strategy to give the people an independent country even by risking his life, she continued.

As the Pakistan occupation forces launched attacks on the unarmed Bangalees, Bangabandhu had started publicising the declaration of the country's independence in line with his war strategy, she said.

Hasina said the strategy of Bangabandhu worked effectively with the pouring in of international support in favour of the Bangalees during the Liberation War as the Pakistanis first launched the attack and carried out genocide and inhuman torture.

The international community had continued their support even after the Pakistani junta took Bangabandhu to Pakistan and sentenced him in a sedition case due to the war strategy taken up by Bangabandhu.

"How effective his speech was from the point of view of a war strategy! And how realistic his every step was! That is very important," she said.



Locals line the bank of the Surma river in Kazirbazar area of Sylhet city yesterday. The rampant pollution in the river has forced oxygen-deprived fish to come up to the surface and locals rushed to catch them by hand or through fishing nets.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

Country on recovery trail

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questions are how successful the country is in tackling the pandemic and what lessons it has learnt.

Going back to those initial uncertain and scary days, Bangladesh started badly.

With the limited availability of testing facilities, an acute crisis of personal protective gears and a lack of know-how in treating Covid patients made the situation worrisome in the early days. Corruption allegations in procurement of medical equipment, fake Covid certificates and poor enforcement of quarantine and lockdown made things even more complicated.

The government brought things under control by increasing testing facilities and Covid-dedicated hospitals, and formulating guidelines on treatment.

When many countries were struggling to collect Covid vaccines, Bangladesh excelled in this crucial front by securing vaccine doses for its people. The country has so far inoculated over 35 lakh people.

Be-Nazir Ahmed, former director (disease control) of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), said the pandemic was not as severe in Bangladesh as it was in many other countries.

"From the public health point of view, if we dissect the pandemic, we can say it was not an extremely heavyburden for us. But if we could have stopped the air traffic earlier, the infection rate and also the causality would have been much lower."

The government has done all the necessary things, including tracing and testing, but not in time, Be-Nazir pointed out.

"Pandemic is a war-like situation where every minute counts. We enforced lockdown but did not get desired results because we withdrew it when the infection rate was on the rise."

The public health expert said scarcity of information also compounded the problem.

Warning that the pandemic is not

over yet, he said, "The infection rate is increasing again in the country. If we fail to control it right now, it may surge once again like in the last summer."

Contacted, Health Minister Zahid Maleque said that when the pandemic hit the country, there were crises of equipment and manpower at hospitals, but the government's prompt decisions helped keep things under control.

The minister said they have successfully managed the situation despite some loopholes.

He further said the biggest challenge ahead is the smooth implementation of the mass vaccination campaign.

"We are not manufacturers [of Covid vaccines], so we have to rely on others. Since the government alone cannot do everything, private entities should be engaged. People have to come forward to help the government eradicate Covid from the country."

During the nationwide lockdown, millions lost jobs, poverty rate doubled to 42 percent from 20.5 percent and many businesses closed. Income of the vast majority of the population shrank.

Exports -- garment in particular -- hit rock bottom as the importing countries themselves were finding it difficult to keep their economies afloat. Bangladesh was staring at an unprecedented three-pronged crisis: health, economic and food.

But the country fared well beyond expectations on the economic front with remittance inflow remaining robust and the ever-deprived farmers keeping the food chain steady throughout last year.

The government has so far rolled out 23 bailout packages, announced at different times since March last year, to absorb the economic shock from the pandemic. The total amount of financial assistance now stands at Tk 124,053 crore -- 4.44 percent of the country's GDP.

Bangladesh's economic growth was 3.8 percent -- the third-highest in the world and the highest in Asia in 2020, according to the International Monetary Fund.

Evaluating the government efforts, eminent economist Hossain Zillur

Rahman said the country has done well in handling the pandemic on the macroeconomic front, but a lot has to be done to revive the micro-economy.

"From the very beginning, we thought of economic recovery and that's why we were not hit badly. In terms of macroeconomy, we succeeded in tackling the pandemic. But when it comes to microeconomy, we were badly affected. Poverty rate increased and we are yet to return to the pre-pandemic status."

Zillur, also chairperson of Brac, said the key point is that the recovery is uneven in terms of macro-economy, especially in the service sector.

"In agriculture, we did a good job but farmers were hit hard due to the pandemic. The number of the new poor has increased. And the biggest challenge is human development."

There were no specific directives for the education and human development sectors during the pandemic. "It is a big question how these two issues will be addressed," he added.

In the wake of the pandemic, the government announced general holidays in late March and shut all the educational institutions from March 17 last year.

Though it introduced online classes, the move failed to make any impact. A study in January this year found that about 69.5 percent of the 2,952 students covered by a survey did not participate in distance learning and 57.9pc of them said they could not join classes due to a lack of devices.

Manzoor Ahmed, Prof Emeritus of Brac University, said the loss of an academic year is huge. Interim arrangements have not brought any success.

"We will need medium and long-term plans and have to implement those to make up for the losses."

He also said Covid has exposed the existing disparity and other problems in the education sector.

"We will need to go for a blended education approach. We will also need to work on the issue of connectivity and digital devices as well as the capacity of teachers."

11 more die, 606 get Covid-19

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Eleven people have died from Covid-19 in the 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday and at least 606 new infections were recorded in that period.

The total number of deaths has now reached 8,462 and the death rate stands at 1.54 percent, according to a press release issued by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

The 606 new infections took the total number of people infected to 5,50,330, added the release.

The current positivity rate is 4.3 percent, up from 4.13 percent the previous day. The total positivity rate in the country stands at 13.27 percent.

A total of 14,092 samples were tested across the country in the 24 hours.

At least 1,037 Covid-19 patients have recovered during the period.

The total number of recoveries now stand at 5,03,003 and the recovery rate at 91.40 percent.

Among the deceased, nine were male and two were female. One was between 31 and 40 years old, one between 41 and 50, two were between 51 and 60, and seven were above 60 years old, added the release.

If one tarnishes

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considered, he said.

The state has filed the leave to appeal petition, challenging a High Court order that granted bail to 61-year-old Sylhet resident Golam Sarwar in a case filed under the Digital Security Act accusing him of posting "derogatory" comments on facebook about some "distinguished persons", said Deputy Attorney General Bishwajit Debnath.

He didn't give The Daily Star any details about the comments and the names of the "distinguished persons" since the SC prohibited him from disclosing them.

The apex court, however, dismissed the state's appeal and upheld the HC bail order for Sarwar because he had cardiovascular diseases and had four stents in his heart.

Following a bail petition by Sarwar, the HC on October 11, 2020, granted him bail for a year on health grounds.

The state then filed a petition with the SC, seeking stay on the HC order of bail.

The Appellate Division's Chamber Judge Md Nuruzzaman on October 18, 2020, stayed for eight weeks the HC order that granted bail to Sarwar.

The judge also asked the state to move a leave to appeal petition before its full bench against the HC order.

Accordingly, the state moved the leave to appeal petition before the full bench of the apex court yesterday for staying the HC order of bail for Sarwar.

Sarwar's lawyer M Asaduzzaman told this correspondent that Rab filed the case against his client with Sylhet Sadar Police Station on March 15, 2020, under the Digital Security Act, 2018.

It accused him of making derogatory comments about distinguished persons including the prime minister.

According to the documents annexed to the FIR, Sarwar made comments on Facebook about Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, he said.

"The apex court asked me to tell my client to remain careful in making comments on social media. I will do so in line with the Supreme Court order," Asaduzzaman said.

He added that there was no legal bar for his client's release from Sylhet jail.

Asaduzzaman told the SC that his client had been in custody since March 14, 2020, but no charge sheet was submitted to the trial court.

Sarwar has been suffering in jail for almost a year without a trial, he said.

Iran dailies hail Pope-Sistani meet as chance for peace

AFP, Tehran

The Iraq meeting of Pope Francis and Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, one of Shia Islam's top clerics, was front-page news in Iran yesterday, with some media declaring it a chance for peace in the neighbouring country.

Officials in Iran, a Shia-majority country like Iraq, have not yet commented on the pontiff's historic visit to Iraq that began on Friday.

Tehran, with its allies within Baghdad's state-sponsored Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary force, helped Iraqi troops defeat the Sunni jihadist Islamic State (IS) group at the end of 2017.

Iran's reformist Sazandegi daily said the two religious leaders are now "the standard-bearers of world peace" and called their meetings "the most effective event (in the history of) dialogue between religions".

Another reformist daily, Shargh, said it was "a symbolic spectacle showing the importance of cooperation between followers of different religions".

budget.

Besides, there is a lack of orientation and regular training on the provisions and usage of the law among the implementing agencies, said Prof Taslima Yasmin.

As per the act, after receiving a complaint, a police officer needs to inform the victims about her right to make an application for obtaining a remedy under the law, the availability of medical services and services of the enforcement officers, and effective coordination among the implementing agencies.

In reality, they are unaware of the duties, she said.

About the lack of awareness, Arpita Das, coordinator of violence against women and girls in MJF, said if stakeholders, especially the lawyers, remain ignorant about the remedy of a specific law, they cannot suggest a victim pursue it.

"When a victim comes to them with such issues, they usually suggest to settle either through informal mediation or under following legislations -- the Penal Code 1860, the Women and Children Repression Act 2000, and the Dowry Prohibition Act 2018," she added.

A 2020 MJF study found that the current reporting practices of domestic violence start with informing the UP members, but they often blame the victims and support the perpetrators, as the members need the "husbands' muscle to remain in power."

Lack of shelters and livelihood options, survivors are mostly asked to return her to the perpetrators, in absence of an alternative, which is a major setback of the law.

The remedies provided in the DVPP act made the law unique, through which a victim can address interim and permanent protection orders, residence order, compensation order, and safe custody order, upon application to the court, and these are civil in nature, said Prof Taslima.

"The victims and lawyers generally prefer more stringent penal sanctions for the accused, but not the remedies," she said.

State Minister Fazilatun Nessa Indira for Women and Children Affairs could not be reached for comments.

Law there, awareness little

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reality for a huge number of women and children in Bangladesh, irrespective of socioeconomic status and urban or rural settings.

Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, such violence was rampant. According to the rights body Ain o Salish Kendra, 554 women faced domestic violence last year.

Of those, 367 were killed by their husbands and 71 by the husbands' family members.

Except for murder and suicide incidents, only 35 cases have been filed for domestic violence incidents, it said.

A survey of Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), another rights organisation, showed a total of 37,912 women in its working districts faced domestic violence from April to September last year.

Despite such a huge number of violent incidents, there are only a handful of cases filed under the act in the last 10 years. A complete statistic of the cases is hard to come by.

But a yet-to-be-published qualitative study, commissioned by ActionAid Bangladesh, shows a dismal picture.

The study that analysed the case records from the Chief Judicial Magistrate Courts in over a dozen of districts found no case was filed under the law in Bhola and Sherpur districts courts in the past 10 years.

Conducted by Taslima Yasmin, assistant professor at the law department of Dhaka University, the analysis said there had been only one petition filed in Barishal court in the last 10 years and that too was still pending disposal.

The study, styled "Exploring the obstacles in accessing justice for survivors of domestic violence: How effective is the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010" was conducted between October and December 2020.

"A lawyer who's practicing in the metropolitan magistrate courts in Dhaka for 25 years told us that no one approached him to file a case under the act in the last 10 years. He saw only one case being heard in a court during this time," Prof Taslima told