

BANGLADESH UPDATE



1,051
New cases in 24hrs



5,54,156
Total cases



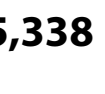
8,502
Deaths



5,07,920
Recoveries



2,635,338
Deaths



118,830,036
Total cases

PROVIDING EYECARE TO PEOPLE

Each upazila to get community vision centre: PM

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said the government will set up community vision centres in all upazilas across the country in phases to provide better eyecare services to local people.



"Eyecare services are costly. General people can't afford these. I'm not only the prime minister, but also the daughter of the Father of the Nation. So, it's my responsibility to ensure healthcare services for every national of the country. I've been trying to perform this responsibility as well," she said.

The PM was inaugurating operations of community vision centres set up at 70 upazila health complexes in 20 districts under five divisions via video conference.

Hasina joined the virtual inaugural ceremony, held at the National Institute of Ophthalmology and Hospital in the capital, from the Gono Bhaban.

She said the government has already taken up a plan to establish 110 more community vision centres at the upazila level.

The PM said healthy people are needed to properly take the country forward. "Healthy people are required to build a healthy Bangladesh."

Mentioning that the government is providing free vitamin-A, different vaccines and medicines to people, Hasina said, "We've been creating scopes so that people can stay healthy everywhere."

Later, she exchanged views with locals and stakeholders of three upazilas -- Pirganj of Rangpur, Nachol of Chapainawabganj and Haluaghat of Mymensingh -- through the video conference.

Health Minister Zahid Maleque also spoke at the function conducted by Principal Secretary Ahmad Kaikaus.

Health Secretary Abdul Mannan delivered the welcome speech, while Director of the National Institute of Ophthalmology (NIO) Prof Dr Golam Mostafa described the NIO activities briefly.

Golam Mostafa said the prime minister inaugurated operations of community vision centres in 20 upazilas in 2018.

He said there is a plan to set up 110 more community vision centres in the country by June 2023.

Stating that the government has transformed the country into "Digital Bangladesh", Hasina mentioned that now it has become easy to get healthcare services as there has been marked development in telemedicine systems.

"Now people can avail themselves of the services from expert physicians through the telemedicine system staying at home. Now our Bangladesh is Digital Bangladesh. So, we've taken the digital services to the doorsteps of people," she added.

Hasina said the congenital (birth) blindness has almost removed from the country as the government provides treatment to pregnant mothers.

Now people get healthcare services and 30 free medicines from community clinics across the country, she said, adding that locals, particularly women, can easily get the services and medicines from the clinics.

About Covid-19, the PM called upon all to follow the health protection protocols, including wearing face masks, washing hands frequently to remain clean, and thus check the coronavirus.

Hasina also urged people to get vaccinated in a disciplined manner after registration so that no chaos occurs in the Covid-19 vaccination centres as happened in the past.



Fellow protesters carry an injured comrade on a stretcher during an anti-coup protest in North Dagon, Yangon, yesterday. Story on page 12.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Smooth railway traffic not soon

FROM PAGE 1

In January, the railways ministry wrote to the Chinese government for the third time to expedite the process for signing the loan deal, laying emphasis on the importance of the synchronisation of the two projects to get the desired benefits.

Railway officials said completion of one project without the other will not solve the gridlock in rail traffic.

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister's Office in November last year directed the railways ministry to significantly reduce the cost of the Joydebpur-Ishwardi project, leading to further negotiations with the contractor.

Although PMO ordered project costs to be cut, railway officials told The Daily Star they feared delays in project implementation may cause cost escalation.

As per the negotiations, the contractor is set to take four years to complete the project after launching the work, they said.

BR's Director General Dharendra Nath Mazumder, however, said once the loan deal is signed and re-negotiation with the contractor is done, they will bring forward the deadline and direct the contractor to speed up their work to make up for lost time.

THE BOTTLENECK
Delayed schedules of trains connecting the capital with the north-western and southern regions have been a common phenomenon for the last few years.

Dhaka is linked to these regions by the single-line Joydebpur-Ishwardi section.

According to railway officials, a maximum of 22 trains can run smoothly through the single line per day. But with up to 42 trains now running through it daily, trains have to wait at nearby stations to make way for each other,

causing delays in their schedules.

Besides, the "block section" -- the distance from one station to another -- between Joydebpur and Bangabandhu Bridge (East) Station is relatively long, meaning each train has to wait longer to make way for another.

Then comes the delay at Bangabandhu Bridge.

Trains have to run at the "restricted speed" of 20 kilometres per hour while crossing the bridge. It takes around half an hour to cross the 7km stretch between the bridge's east and west stations, they added.

THE DUAL PROBLEM

Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan, on several occasions, said the problems regarding the delay in train schedules on this route cannot be resolved until the construction of the rail bridge and the dual-gauge double line from Joydebpur to Ishwardi is complete.

Back in January 2016, the government took up the project to construct a dedicated double-line rail bridge over the Jamuna river and after a long delay, physical work of the project started in August last year.

Once the 4.8km bridge is constructed under the Tk 16,781 crore project by August 2024, 88 trains can run smoothly per day, project officials said. The government took up the Tk 14,250.6 crore project to turn the 174-km Joydebpur-Ishwardi section into a dual-gauge double line in November 2018.

BR completed negotiations with China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation for implementing the project.

In March 2019, the railways ministry sent a letter to the Chinese government, requesting them to sign the deal. In the last two years, the ministry has sent a letter to the Chinese government thrice -- the last one in January -- ministry

sources said.

Then, in September last year, the PMO formed a high-powered committee to review the costs of three railway projects supposed to be implemented with Chinese finance and by Chinese companies.

Following the committee recommendations, the PMO directed the railways ministry to reduce the costs of two projects -- one of which was the Joydebpur-Ishwardi project.

As per the directives, Tk 1,495.52 crore has to be slashed from the project's contract price -- Tk 11,586.68 crore -- approved by the Cabinet Committee on Government Purchase for the Joydebpur-Ishwardi rail line expansion project. The amount is 12.91 percent of the contract price.

BR, at a meeting on December 9 last year, decided to discuss the PMO decision with the Chinese contractor and re-send the procurement proposal to the Cabinet Committee on Government Purchase.

The meeting also formed a three-member committee led by the then Additional Director General (Infrastructure) Dharendra Nath Mazumder, who took charge as BR DG early last month, for this task.

Contacted, BR DG Dharendra Nath said they have already sent the proposal to the contractor for the cost-cutting and they are now reviewing it. "We hope to get their reply soon," he told The Daily Star on March 4.

Regarding the delay in loan sanctioning, Dharendra Nath said, "In that case we will ask the contractor to speed up their work. We will reduce the lead time.

"Works of the project can be done quickly as it will be a new line."

He added, "It will be good for us if the decision is taken as early as possible."

Local airlines brace

FROM PAGE 1

told this correspondent that the latest hike will deliver a severe blow to the local industry.

"This will affect our operation cost, and, ultimately, the people will pay more for a ticket," he said.

He added that his company will keep the passengers in mind when increasing the ticket prices.

A top official of Biman Bangladesh Airlines, the national flag carrier, said fuel cost directly affects the company's profitability and sustainability.

"It has become a big challenge for us to compete with foreign airline companies because of the high price of jet fuel in the country," the official said, requesting anonymity.

The BPC fixes fuel prices and increases it in violation of articles 34 and 22 (kha) of Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission Act, aviation officials said.

Contacted, Syed Mehdi Hasan, director (operations and planning) of BPC, told The Daily Star that the local price corresponded to those in the international market.

"Jet fuel still costs less in Bangladesh, when compared to the prices in our neighboring countries, including India," said Mehdi, head of a committee that decides jet fuel prices.

"We didn't hike the price to make profits. We did it to keep up with the international market," he added.

Two more years

FROM PAGE 1

said once influenza was a pandemic, but now it has become an endemic.

"Biologically, any pandemic ends through a combination of infection of adequate number of people who develop immunity and vaccinating another group of people. These two together help achieve herd immunity. We expect that the situation will come under control as a huge number of people have already been infected and vaccines are being administered."

He said Covid-19 vaccines were authorised on an emergency basis by the global regulatory and drug control authorities.

"It is quite early now to say for how long the vaccine will provide protection as evidence gathered so far is not conclusive and further research and trials are going on. Usually, it is expected to provide some sort of protection for minimum 12 months."

About Bangladesh's tackling of the pandemic, Farhad said though the government had good intentions about containing it, initially there were some problems in the management and implementation of plans and especially in having enough testing facilities and providing adequate protection to frontlines.

"But everything came under control of the government gradually. The pandemic burden was less in Bangladesh compared to many other countries of the world and Bangladesh tackles it well in such a resource constraint health system."

He said there was a fear that the virus transmission rate and death rate in Bangladesh would be high, but fortunately it was low due to the government's various timely and proper interventions.

"[Discovery and production of vaccine] is an evolving science and Bangladesh moved with the updated science. Managing vaccines in the initial stage was a big achievement for the country. Bangladesh did well in three aspects -- prevention, patient management and treatment, and vaccination."

The pharmaceutical physician said the pandemic has left a number of issues to learn from not only for Bangladesh but for the whole world. The pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of the healthcare system and showed how important the health care sector is.

"This pandemic has hit hard all the sectors. Bangladesh should focus on reorganising the public health facilities, establishing good disease surveillance

and monitoring system, digitalisation of health care system and development of vaccine production facilities. Bangladesh should take up some short- and long term plans to contain the future pandemics."

Farhad said Bangladesh should now put emphasis on new drug research and discovery as it has some world class pharmaceuticals companies.

The public health expert also said the country should take up a long term plan to manufacture vaccines locally by in-licensing at the first phase and the government should come forward to support the pharmaceutical industry.

"As part of the short term plan, we excelled in procuring vaccine for the majority of the population. But now we should focus on manufacturing vaccines in the country. It is not a difficult task. This pandemic has opened up an opportunity for us. We should focus on vaccine production," he added.

Farhad said local Bangladeshi pharmaceuticals companies now produce mainly generic products. Their production has showed excellent growth in recent years and they are contributing more than 90 percent of the overall available medicines in the market.

"We have some world class pharmaceutical companies. Various research organisations have already sequenced genomes of Covid-19 but we could not take it to the next level. Now we should put emphasis on more research to go to the next level," he observed.

Farhad said if India can produce a vaccine, Bangladesh should also be able to do it as the country has huge expert manpower and infrastructure.

"We have to take discovery of drug to the next level. Pharmaceuticals sector has the potentials but we have to translate the potentials into reality. Bangladesh should participate in phase three and four trials. It is the right time to produce a new product."

The epidemiologist stressed the need for drawing up a long term plan and conducting research on vaccine efficacy and its adverse effects.

Farhad said he, as a Bangladeshi, took great pride in becoming a part of the vaccine development process.

"It was a big milestone for my career. It's a great satisfaction for me that in my career of more than 25 years in public health, epidemiology and as a pharmaceuticals expert, I could have the opportunity to contribute to overcome this crisis of the world as a Bangladeshi," he said.

Mirza's rival held hrs after party warning

FROM PAGE 1

Badal went to Maijdee Court area around noon and he was picked up by men in plainclothes from near the Noakhali Press Club around 4:30pm, a family member told these correspondents.

IF OBAYDUL WANTS

Meanwhile, Mirza, the younger brother of AL General Secretary and Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader, told The Daily Star yesterday that the violence in Basurhat would stop only if Obaidul Quader wanted it.

"If Obaidul Quader says 'no' today, there will be no violence here from tomorrow. I tell you, I don't know the reason behind his silence," Mirza said at his office in Basurhat yesterday.

Expressing no confidence in police investigation, he demanded a judicial probe.

Mirza claimed that local politics in Noakhali and Feni were at the hands of people involved in land grabbing, tender manipulation, and corruption.

There has been pressure from the MPs of Noakhali and Feni "to stop my voice against corruption. But I will not stop," he said.

He added that he went to meet Obaidul at his home in Dhaka in February, but Obaidul's wife did not allow him to meet his brother, citing coronavirus restrictions.

"Two days ago, I had a talk with the prime minister and she told me to stay calm. I am quiet now."

"On March 17, we will celebrate Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's birthday. Those miscreants may attack again," he said.

Late last night, a large number of policemen were seen around his Basurhat office.

Asked, the SP said the policemen were there for security reasons. He also said no case had been filed against Mirza.

Around 8:45pm, Mirza began a Facebook live and talked for 20 minutes.

"I am not happy that Badal has been arrested," Mirza said.

"Badal shot at me during the clash that day [Tuesday], and that bullet hit a boy of Chhatra League, who was next to me. He is now at a hospital in Dhaka... I can't say how the CNG driver Alauddin came here. I did not give arms to any of my leaders or activists. If I did, God would punish me."

He alleged that because of Obaidul, Noakhali district Awami League got the opportunity to engage in "bad politics".

"If I or my men are involved in the incidents, I will not object to any action the government takes."

Before getting arrested, Badal told The Daily Star yesterday that Mirza should be blamed for the recurring clashes. He claimed that his men were not involved in the attack on Mirza's men on Tuesday.

Both the groups chased each other, threw brick chunks, hurled crude bombs, and fired shots for over two hours, witnesses said.

At least 30 people, including six policemen, were injured. Twelve of them got shot.

The administration imposed section 144 in Basurhat for 18 hours on Wednesday.

The streets were relatively empty and only a few shops were open in Basurhat yesterday.

Over 300 members of law enforcement agencies were deployed in the Zero Point, Shaheed Minar, and Bangabandhu Chattar areas, police said.

Court fixes March 24 to decide on charges

FROM PAGE 1

The judge asked Kajol to appear before the tribunal on March 24.

After a probe that took almost 10 months, Sub-inspector Mohammad Russell Mollah of the Detective Branch of police gave the charge sheet to the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court of Dhaka on January 27 in the case filed under the Digital Security Act (DSA).

Usmin Ara Bally, a central committee member of Bangladesh Jubo Mohila League, filed the case with Hazaribagh Police Station on March 10 last year.

According to the charge sheet, Kajol shared fake news on his Facebook page about the arrest and alleged crimes of expelled Jubo Mohila League leader Shamima Nur Papia.

The investigator wrote that Papia was arrested by Rab for her alleged involvement in different crimes and she was expelled by the organisation soon after her arrest.

On paper, Kajol was arrested on May 14 last year. On June 28, he was placed on a two-day remand.

Kajol also faced 53 days of enforced disappearance and spent seven months in prison. He had disappeared on March 10 last year and was "found" by the Border Guard Bangladesh roaming near Benapole border 53 days later.

He then landed in jail in the case filed under the DSA by lawmaker Saifuzzaman Shikhor, and two Jubo Mohila League activists over a Facebook post.

A lower court kept denying him bail for seven months, until the High Court on November 24 granted him bail in one case and ordered the investigation officer and the Cyber Tribunal to submit reports in the two others.

On December 17, the HC granted him bail in the two other cases after Kajol's lawyer pointed out that the probes had to be concluded within 75 days of filing of the cases, and the investigators had failed to do so.

However, the investigators have yet to submit the probe reports in the two other cases filed with Sher-e-Bangla Nagar and Kamrangirchar police stations.

These two cases were also recorded under the DSA in March last year.

BANGLADESHI SHIPBREAKER'S DEATH

UK court allows his widow to pursue claim for compensation

THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION, Dhaka

A Bangladeshi woman whose husband died dismantling an oil tanker in a local shipyard was given the green light this week to keep pursuing a claim for compensation from a UK company linked to the vessel in a test case for the shipbreaking industry.

Britain's Court of Appeal threw out a request by London-based shipbroker Maran (UK) Ltd for the negligence case to be dismissed, the second appeal the company has lost.

Hamida Begum's husband, Khalil Mollah, 32, fell to his death in 2018 while breaking up the tanker Ekta in the Bangladesh port of Chattogram, home to one of the world's largest ship-breaking yards, where vessels are dismantled for scrap metal.

Her UK-based lawyers said working conditions in Bangladesh's yards were known to be dangerous and argued Maran bore responsibility for Mollah's death by selling the tanker to an intermediary knowing it would probably end up in Chittagong.

British lawyers representing Begum launched the legal battle in April 2019.

SEE PAGE 10 COL 3

Covid cases keep rising

1,051 test positive, six die in a day

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh is seeing a continuous rise in the number of daily Covid-19 infection cases as it recorded 1,051 fresh ones in the last 24 hours till yesterday morning.

Six more coronavirus-related deaths were reported during the period, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

Though the daily infection rate fell slightly to 5.82 percent from 5.98 percent on Wednesday, the number of patients rose to 1,051 yesterday from Wednesday's 1,018.

The mortality rate also came down to 1.53 percent from 1.54 percent for the past few weeks, the DGHS said in a handout.

With the latest figures, the Covid-19 fatalities climbed to 8,502 and the total infections to 554,156, the handout added.

Besides, it said, 1,307 people recovered from the virus infections during the period. So far, 507,920 patients -- 91.66 percent -- have recovered.

Bangladesh reported its first cases on March 8, 2020, and the first case on March 18 in the same year.

ACC delayed

FROM PAGE 1

(NBFIs). He fled the country on October 23, 2019.

The ACC reportedly sent the travel ban notice to the immigration office 13 hours after deciding to issue the notice. Those 13 hours were enough for Halder to flee, the bench of Justice M Enayetur Rahim and Justice Md Mostafizur Rahman said yesterday.

The bench was holding a hearing on a writ petition filed by Reptiles Farm Limited and others challenging the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU) action to confiscate their bank accounts for allegedly laundering money abroad.

Lawyer Khurshid told the HC that the ACC sent PK Halder's travel ban notice on October 22, 2019, through the postal service, and the notice reached the immigration department within 24 hours.

The commission did not do any negligence in taking steps to prevent him from leaving the country, he told the court.

The HC bench said there are internet services now, the notice could have been sent within a few moments using the services.

How 13 hours' time was needed to send the notice from the ACC headquarters to the immigration office, the court asked, expressing astonishment.

Khurshid said the ACC sent the notice following all the relevant procedures.

The bench said it will resume hearing on the petition next week as no lawyer was present for the writ petitioners yesterday.

Deputy Attorney General Sarwar Hossain Bappi represented the state during the court proceedings.

PK Halder, former NRB Global Bank managing director, who has allegedly siphoned around Tk 10,200 crore from some NBFIs, reportedly fled the country through Jashore's Benapole land port at 3:38pm on October 23, 2019, less than an hour before immigration police received his travel ban notice.

Meanwhile yesterday, the same HC bench said the ACC "follow the money policy" regarding investigations into cases over BASIC Bank loan scams and it was wrong.

The court said this while hearing a bail petition of Mohammad Ali, former general manager of BASIC Bank's Shantinagar branch, in a corruption case filed in 2015.

The HC granted bail to Mohammad Ali as investigation into the case is yet to be completed.