



The Daily Star



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COVID-19 CASES IN BANGLADESH

Worrying spike

South African variant also found; 12 variants active

MOUJIB AHMED SUJAN

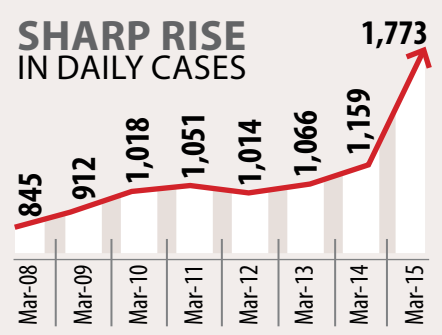
Following detection of the UK variant, the South African variant of coronavirus has been detected in Bangladesh, according to global genome-sequencing database GISAID.

According to the database, the South African variant -- also known as B.1.351 or 501.V2 -- was first reported from Bangladesh on January 24, which was already also found in the UK and the US.

There are 11 other variants including the UK one in the country, which were found earlier in multiple countries, according to data from GISAID.

News of detection of the South African variant comes when Bangladesh is seeing a steep rise in daily new infections and positivity rates of the highly transmissible virus.

On February 21, a steady fall in the positivity rate had reached 2.33 percent, which spiked to 9.48 percent yesterday -- a fourfold rise. Daily new infections had been



as low as 845 on March 8, which more than doubled to 1,773 new daily cases.

Deaths have also risen to 26 yesterday from 18 on Sunday.

Unlike the UK variant, the preliminary work suggests the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine offers "limited" protection against mild disease from the South African variant, but experts say it should still protect against severe disease, reports BBC.

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Sitting in front of the ward-35 councillor's office in the capital's Moghbazar area, an elderly man along with others around his age wait to register themselves for old-age allowances. The initiative has been taken by the social welfare ministry in cooperation with the Dhaka North City Corporation. The photo was taken yesterday.

Khaleda out of jail for 6 more months

Govt again extends suspension of her jail sentence

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia will be able to go to any hospital to avail treatment as per doctors' advice but she will not be allowed to go abroad.

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan disclosed the conditions after the government yesterday extended the suspension of Khaleda's jail sentence for six more months.

According to a home ministry circular, the government suspended the jail sentence as per Section 401(1) of the Code of

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50YRS OF INDEPENDENCE World leaders to deliver video messages

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Global leaders, including the Chinese and French presidents, and the prime ministers of Japan, Canada, South Korea, Cambodia, and Pope Francis would deliver video messages during the celebrations of Bangladesh's golden jubilee of independence and Mujib Borsho.

The celebrations at the National Parade Ground begin tomorrow, the birthday of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and it would end on Independence Day.

Chinese President Xi Jinping and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau would deliver recorded welcome speeches tomorrow, while Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen would deliver his speech on March 18, OIC Secretary General Yousef bin Ahmad Al-Othaimen on March 20, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga on March 22, Unesco DG Audrey Azoulay on March 23, Pope Francis on March 24, South Korean Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun and Japanese friend of Bangladesh Takashi Hayakawa's son Osamu Hayakawa on March 25.

Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih would be at the programme as the guest of honour tomorrow, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka Mahinda Rajapaksa on March 19, Nepalese President Bidya Devi

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Modi on twin missions

Flies in on March 26 to join Mujib Borsho celebration, connect Matua factor for West Bengal polls

PARTHA PRATIM BHATTACHARJEE

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's scheduled visit to Bangladesh will not just be confined to attending the Mujib Borsho celebrations, he will tie up some loose ends of his script for the high-octane West Bengal polls.

As per his programme schedule, the Indian premier is expected to visit a sacred shrine of "Matua" community at Orakandi in Gopalganj district, a move the political analysts believe is aimed at wooing hearts of the Matuas across the border.

After arriving in Dhaka on March 26, Modi will fly off to Orakandi on March 27, the day West Bengal goes to the first of the eight-phase elections. Modi will pay respect to Harichand Thakur, the founder of the Matua sect, who was born there on March 11, 1812.

But why is the Matuas important in West Bengal's assembly election? Analysts say Modi will be the first Indian prime minister ever to visit Orakandi, an emotional place for 1.5 crore voters in West Bengal. Around over 3.5 crore Matua people live across the state.

The politically active community is a decisive factor in 30 out of the total 294 assembly constituencies. Besides, it has indirect influence in around 63 seats, they say.

Through his visit to the shrine, Modi will try to woo this Matua vote bank, who became somewhat frustrated with the non-implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act, the analysts say.

"Modi's visit to Orakandi is very political. He is going there to woo the Matua voters," Biswanath Chakraborty, a professor of political science at Rabindra Bharati University in India, told The Daily Star over the phone.

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Forex now for dev projects

For the first time, a fast-track project gets 524m euros from foreign exchange reserves as govt opens BIDF for infrastructure development

REJAUUL KARIM BYRON and WASIM BIN HABIB

In a first-ever move, the government is going to use €524.56 million from the ballooning foreign exchange reserves for a development project.

This is being done as part of a plan to use the money from the reserve for development projects.

The government formed Bangladesh Infrastructure Development Fund (BIDF) to lend the money from the forex reserves for the dredging of a channel for Payra Port, a seaport in Kalapara, Patuakhali.

Initially, investments will be made from the BIDF to the port and power sectors. The annual investment target from the fund would be no more than \$2 billion, according to finance ministry documents.

The government would pick those projects for the foreign currency loans that would have a high rate of return so that it can repay the loans also in the foreign currencies, said the documents.

The capital and maintenance dredging of Rabanabad Channel of Payra Port scheme is the first project

to be financed through BIDF.

A tripartite loan agreement was signed yesterday between the Finance Division, Payra Port Authority and Sonali Bank Limited to finance Tk 5,417 crore (€524.56 million) for the infrastructural development project.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina joined the signing agreement virtually from the Gono Bhaban.

Sonali Bank would finance the Ramnabad Channel dredging project. Bangladesh Bank will issue the loan to Sonali Bank at an interest rate of

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These are among the four academically unrecorded antiquities kept at a Hindu monastery in Sylhet city. The photos were taken recently.

PHOTO: TARUN SARKAR

Travel back in time with old sculptures

Four unrecorded antiquities found in Sylhet monastery opens up new horizon of archaeological research

TARUN SARKAR

Four ages-old stone sculptures, so far academically unrecorded, have been found at a monastery in Sylhet city and can open up a new avenue of studying art and heritage of ancient Shrihatta.

These antiquities -- two Vishnu idols, a miniature Ganesh statue and a Shiva Lingam -- are worshipped by Hindu devotees at the Shree Shree Balaram Jee Akhra (monastery) in

Mirabazar area.

Some researchers think the Shiva Lingam could be from the period between 15th and 16th century and the three other sculptures from 10th to 12th century.

"These are very important antiquities for the history and heritage of Sylhet," said Prof Mozammel Hoque of archaeology department at Jahangirnagar University.

Historians and researchers said the Balaram Akhra was built

around three hundred years ago by a zamindar named Madan Muni.

Gopika Shyam Purkayastha, vice president of its managing committee, said one of the Vishnu idols was found during a re-excavation of a canal for renovation of a bridge in 1973. The same year, the second one was found while digging a pond near the monastery.

The height of both the idols is seven feet three inches.

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A new era of development for the banking sector of the nation

City Bank Perpetual Bond of BDT 400 Crore

City Bank is proud to announce the completion of the country's first ever Basel-III compliant, Additional Tier-1, Contingent-Convertible Perpetual Bond. This instrument will optimize the bank's capital structure for sustainable growth as well as revolutionize the recapitalization options for banks in Bangladesh.

We, at City Bank, express our deep gratitude to all stakeholders whose contributions made this challenging venture successful.

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