

BANGLADESH UPDATE

1,773 New cases in 24hrs

5,59,168 Total cases

8,571 Deaths

5,13,127 Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

2,667,255 Deaths

120,553,130 Total cases

INDO-BANGLA WATER SHARING Secys start talks in Delhi today

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh and India hold the water-secretary level meeting in Delhi today ahead of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh on March 26-27.

Water Resources Ministry Secretary Kabir Bin Anwar and his Indian counterpart Pankaj Kumar will lead their respective sides in the meeting.

"Our water secretary is already in Delhi... Water-sharing issues of six rivers and other things will be discussed," Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen told reporters at an event at the Foreign Service Academy yesterday.

Dhaka and Delhi began water-sharing talks on six rivers -- the Manu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gumti, Dharla and Dudhkumar -- in August 2019 after the two countries failed to sign the Teesta water-sharing deal due to West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's last-minute opposition in 2011.

This has been an issue of friction in the bilateral relations, but India says the state government approval is a precondition, as per the country's constitution, for such deals on common rivers.

"Teesta [deal] was final. Those who were present in the meeting told us in each page, initials were there. We know why it has not been signed then. India repeatedly said they stand by the deal. We raise the issue in all the meetings between the two countries," Momen said.

Not only the Teesta, he said, the two governments are working on water-sharing of six other rivers. The two countries have 54 rivers in common, but the treaties on water-sharing were inked only on two rivers -- the Ganges in 1996 and the Feni in 2019.

Following the water-secretary level meeting of the two countries in 2019,

technical committees held a meeting in January this year and also shared data on water flows.

The two sides also spoke of collecting data on the amount of water used by the two countries from each of the rivers, Malik Fida A Khan, a member of the committee and executive director at the Centre for Environmental and Geographic Information Services (CEGIS), had told this correspondent.

Malik Fida said once the data on water usage by the two countries is shared, they can develop a water-sharing framework agreement.

A member of the Bangladesh delegation told this correspondent that Bangladesh wants basin-wide river management, which requires sharing of data on environmental flow of the rivers, joint studies, dredging etc.

The official said Bangladesh wants withdrawal of 153 cusec water from the Rahimpur canal for an irrigation project. Bangladesh also wants a joint study on the optimum use of the Ganges water.

"We will discuss these issues in the meeting," he added.

Our New Delhi correspondent adds: the water secretary-level meeting in New Delhi is expected to discuss the issue of withdrawing water from the Feni river for Sabroom town in Tripura for which an MoU was signed with Bangladesh during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit in October 2019, official sources said.

The MoU allows India to withdraw 1.82 cubic feet per second (cusec) of water (equal to 51.4 litres per second) from the river.

The sources said talks are also expected on a possible Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for drawing water from the Surma river.

Another issue to be discussed is flood forecast.



The Chinese ambassador presents a bust of Bangabandhu to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the Gono Bhaban yesterday.

PHOTO: PID

Info ministry renamed

BSS, Dhaka

The Ministry of Information has been renamed as the "Ministry of Information and Broadcasting".

The Cabinet Division yesterday issued a gazette notification in this regard.

China offers Bangladesh 1 lakh Covid shots

UNB, Dhaka

China yesterday offered to provide 100,000 doses of Chinese coronavirus vaccine to Bangladesh for emergency use.

Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Li Jiming made the offer when he met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the Gono Bhaban in the morning, PM's Press Secretary Ihsanul Karim told reporters after the meeting.

The Chinese envoy presented a bust of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to the PM as gift from the Chinese embassy.

Li Jiming also conveyed a greeting message from Chinese President Xi Jinping to the Bangladesh premier.

PM's Principal Secretary Ahmad Kaikaus was present.

NYC pays emotional tribute to more than 30,000 Covid deaths

AFP, New York

New York, the US city most bereaved by the coronavirus, paid a moving tribute Sunday to its 30,258 dead, one year after the start of the pandemic.

"More New Yorkers lost than in World War Two, Vietnam, Hurricane Sandy and 9/11 put together. Every family touched in some way, and for so many families a pain, a pain that is raw," Mayor Bill de Blasio said during a live virtual ceremony, after calling for a moment of silence to honor the victims.

The Democratic mayor heralded the "health care heroes" who "saved lives," sometimes at their own expense.

He also called on New Yorkers to remember the good times. "No matter what happens, no one can take away the dances you've already danced," he said, speaking in Spanish as he quoted Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez, in a city where a third of immigrants are of Latin origin.

World leaders

FROM PAGE 1

Bhandari on March 22, Prime Minister of Bhutan Lotay Tshering on March 24 and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on March 26.

President Abdul Hamid would be present on March 17, 22, and 26, while Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina would be there on March 17, 19, 22, 24, and 26.

"This is a historic event... The global leaders will pay homage to the memories of our Father of the Nation," Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen said at a press conference at the Foreign Service Academy yesterday.

"It shows the depth of our friendship with the countries. They have confidence in the leadership of Bangladesh, and so they are coming here despite the pandemic," he said.

According to foreign ministry officials, cultural troops from Bangladesh as well as India, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Nepal, Turkey, Malaysia, and Brunei would perform during the celebrations.

The themes of the events were named "Bhengechhe Duar, Eshchhe Jyotirmoy" on March 17; "Mohakaler Tarjoni" on March 18; "Jatokal Robe Padma, Jamuna" on March 19; "Tarunner Aloksikhika" on March 20; "Dhangshastoope Jiboner Gaan" on March 21; "Banglar Mati, Aamar Mati" on March 22; "Narimukti, Sammya O Swadhinata" on March 23; "Shanti, Mukti O Manabatar Agradoot" on March 24; "Gonohattyar Kalratri O Alover Ohbijatra" on March 25 and "Swadhinatar 50 Bochhor O Agrasoti'r Subarnorekha" on March 26.

The programmes would be broadcast live on electronic and social media.

Momen said there might be some problems due to the movements of foreign guests and urged all to be accommodative as the occasion was extraordinary.

The minister said several MoUs would be signed with countries whose heads of states or governments would be visiting Bangladesh.

"At least three MoUs will be signed with India. We are still working on those. One of those will be on disaster-risk reduction and the rest are between some institutions of Bangladesh and India," said Momen.

Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen said all the countries, whose heads of state or government are coming, would ink some MoUs with Bangladesh. Those are in the process of finalisation, he said.

Asked if Bangladesh invited all Saarc heads of state or government, Minister Momen said Bangladesh also invited Afghanistan, but received no response.

He said Myanmar has not been invited because "we don't know who is to be invited from Myanmar".

State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam, Secretary (East) at the Foreign Ministry Mashfee Bin Shams, and Foreign Ministry Chief of Protocol M Amanul Haq also spoke at the press conference.

Worrying spike

FROM PAGE 1

According to local experts, if the South African variant is already in the country, it is a cause of concern for the country as it can spread more rapidly.

The South African variant was detected in a sample sent to Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR) for genome sequencing by the National Institute of Laboratory Medicine and Referral Centre on Jan 21, its Director Prof Dr Abul Khair Mohammad Shamsuzzaman told The Daily Star yesterday.

The BCSIR sent the data of the sequencing back to the referral centre in early March, after which the centre forwarded it to the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), said Shamsuzzaman.

This newspaper learnt that the authorities of BCSIR have submitted 93 new genome sequencing data to the GISAID database last week.

When asked, Dr Selim Khan, principal scientist officer at the BCSIR and head of the team, declined to comment in this regard.

To date, a total of 903 genomic sequence data have been uploaded to the GISAID database from Bangladesh.

Interpreting the GISAID database, Md Aminul Islam, Chief Molecular Biologist at Ashiyen Medical College Hospital in Dhaka told The Daily Star, "The GISAID database shows there are 12 variants in Bangladesh which are

also found in multiple countries. Of them, three variants, first detected in the UK, South Africa and Brazil are of more concern."

The IEDCR, which conducts genome sequencing as a government organisation, earlier admitted they have detected the UK variant in the country on January 5.

Despite repeated attempts, this correspondent could not reach any IEDCR officials over phone.

NEW VARIANTS CAUSING FRESH SURGE?

The directorate general of health services (DGHS) has reported 1,773 new cases of Covid-19 in 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday, raising the total count to 5,59,168.

There is as yet no scientific evidence to explain the spike in new cases, deaths and positivity rates, but experts offered two probable reasons.

"There are two options -- either the previous variants have become more active or new variants are causing spikes in transmission. There is not enough scientific data. But I suspect the new variants -- either locally mutated or imported, are contributing here," Prof Ridwanur Rahman, an infectious disease specialist, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Prof Tahmina Shirin, director of the IEDCR, however, dismissed the contribution of new variants to the spike of Covid-19 transmission.

Khaleda out of jail for 6 more months

FROM PAGE 1

Criminal Procedure (CrPC) following the legal opinion of the law ministry.

Khaleda will receive treatment at her home and she cannot leave the country during this period. The order will come into effect from March 25, reads the circular.

Regarding the order, the home minister said the prime minister extended the suspension of Khaleda's sentence in response to her brother Shamim Iskandar's request for her treatment, which he submitted to the ministry a few days ago.

"We had earlier extended the suspension of the sentence for six months upon application of her brother, so that she can avail treatment at home," the minister, told reporters at the secretariat.

On March 2, Shamim Iskandar applied for relaxation of conditions

as well as commutation of Khaleda's sentences.

Responding to a question, the home minister said, "In case of emergency, she [Zia] will return home after being treated at any hospital of the country as per the advice of the doctor. We have no problem about her hospital visits but she will not be able to go abroad."

The two conditions -- staying home and not leaving the country -- will be applied as before but she can avail hospital services like X-rays that is not available at home, the minister explained.

During this period, the address will be her Dhaka residence, he added.

The former prime minister was freed from jail on March 25 last year after the government suspended her jail sentences for six months. The government on September 15

extended the suspension of the jail sentences for six months for the first time.

Khaleda walked out of jail at a time when the world was hit by Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemic, she did not even visit any hospital for treatment. However, doctors visited her at home regularly.

The BNP chief landed in jail on February 8, 2017 after being sentenced to five years' imprisonment by a special court in Dhaka in the Zia Orphanage Trust graft case.

On October 30 the following year, the High Court enhanced her punishment to 10 years after dismissing her appeal in the case.

The former premier was convicted by another special court in Dhaka in the Zia Charitable Trust corruption case on October 29, 2018. She was sentenced to seven years' rigorous imprisonment by the court.

Travel back in time with old sculptures

FROM PAGE 1

The district administration took the two antiquities in its custody and handed them over to the Balaram Akhra after a decade. Cracks were found on the hands of both the idols and they were repaired and recoloured later on.

Talking to The Daily Star, Gopika Shyam said the Ganesh idol and Shiva Lingam were handed over to the monastery between '60s and '80s. The managing committee has no information about how the Ganesh idol, which is two feet three inches tall, ended up here. "But it is certain that the donor was a resident of Sylhet town," said Gopika.

The Shiva Lingam, two feet one inch tall, was donated by Ashutosh Sharma, father of local freedom fighter Chandan Sharma, in 1965. It was in the family temple at their Raynagar residence, said Chandan's son Amitabh Sharma, a local school teacher.

Previously, four ancient Vishnu sculptures were found in Sylhet region.

Historian Kamalakanta Gupta Chowdhury in his book titled "Copper Plate of Sylhet", published in 1967, mentioned three of those. One was found at a pond in Ambarbhana area of Sylhet, the second at a temple in Jagannathpur of Sunamganj and the third at Panchakhanda Basudeva Angan in Beanibaza of Sylhet.

Panchakhanda Basudeva Angan, an ages-old temple, also houses idols of a Dhyan (meditating) Buddha and a Garudashin Vishnu (Lord Vishnu sitting or riding on Garuda, a mythical bird-like creature). The Daily Star ran a report on these two in October last year.



Vishnu is worshipped as the Supreme Lord by the followers of Vaishnavism, a major Hindu denomination alongside Shaivism, Shaktism, and Smartism.

And Shiva Lingam is a symbol that represents Lord Shiva.

Finding both the Vishnu idols and Shiva sculptures in the same area suggests that there could be co-existence of followers of Vaishnavism and Shaivism in this region, said Prof Mozammel Hoque.

About the Shiva Lingam, Amitabh Sharma said, "It was worshipped at our family temple throughout generations. But we don't know anything about its age."

The history of Sharma Brahmins is very old in the region. From the book "Copper Plate of

Sylhet", it can be known that a large number of Sharma families used to live in this region in 10th century.

"From the Shiva Lingam's design, we can assume that it was made between 15th and 16th century," said Md Mosharaf Hossain, former director of the Department of Archaeology, a government body.

The Shiva Lingam has five layers that represent "Pancha Bhoota" or five great elements -- Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Space. Its presence in Sylhet points to the influence of South Indian followers of Shaivism in the region, he said.

Prof Mozammel Hoque said, "Such a Shiva Lingam is rare in Bangladesh; particularly there is no academic record of finding any Shaiva sculpture in Sylhet region."

On the other three sculptures, he said the designs of the idols suggest that they could be from 10th to 12th century.

"We did not find any documents mentioning these four ancient sculptures. Recovery of these sculptures hints that there might be more such antiquities in this region," he said.

"It has created a new horizon of historical and archaeological research in this region."

Dr Dilip Kumar Das Chowdhury, principal of Srihatta Sanskrit College in Sylhet, said ancient Srihatta was full of temples -- for followers of Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism.

So more antiquities may be found if a proper excavation is initiated, he added.

[Tarun Sarkar is a freelance researcher and journalist who writes for The Daily Star]

HC 'shocked' by Al Jazeera report

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court in a full text order has expressed shock at the Al Jazeera report titled "All the Prime Minister's Men" broadcast on February 2, and also regretted that no action was taken to stop transmission of the documentary within the country.

"As the sons of this soil are equally shocked and feel humiliated when we find that the honour, dignity and prestige of our head of the state, government and that of army chief are being maligned, tarnished, demeaned by none other than an international TV channel and some social media platforms," the HC bench of Justice Md Mozibur Rahman Miah and Justice Md Kamrul Hossain Mollah said in the full-text order.

The 37-page full text of the HC order was released yesterday after the judges of the bench completed writing and signed it.

On February 17, the HC bench directed the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) to take effective and immediate measure, requesting the owning company of those social media platforms -- Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube -- not to upload or stream the documentary nationally and internationally through any link and website.

The bench issued the directive on a suo moto (voluntary) move exercising judicial review based on Article 102 (2) of the constitution although it held a detailed hearing on a writ petition filed over the issue. The court disposed of the

writ petition while issuing the directive.

About the writ petition, the HC judges said in the full text order that "overall, given the above facts and circumstances and submission made hereinabove by the learned counsel for the petitioner, learned attorney general, learned counsel for respondent no. 5 [BTRC] and the opinion placed by the Amici Curiae (friends of court), we find that the petitioner is not 'any person aggrieved', and have no locus standi to file this writ petition."

"But from the submission of Attorney General AM Amin Uddin as well as BTRC's lawyer Khandaker Reza-E-Raqib it appears that there has been no prescribed law now in place that enables BTRC to ask or request any owning company of the social media platform as it has been stipulated in the prayer of the writ petition to ban or take down any content that may malign the prestige and dignity of the highest authorities of an elected democratic government or stir public sentiment of a particular country."

"So in such a view of exigency of the issue, this court on exercising judicial review basing Article 102(2) of the Constitution thus suo motu direct the respondent no. 5 [BTRC] to take effective and immediate measure requesting the owning company of those social medias, that is Twitter, Facebook, Instagram & YouTube not to upload or stream the documentary as mentioned above nationally and internationally any further through any link and website as mentioned in the prayer portion of the writ petition," the HC bench said.

Forex now for dev

FROM PAGE 1

1 percent. The latter will disburse the loan to Payra Port authorities at 2 percent interest rate.

The repayment period is 10 years, excluding a three-year "grace period", finance ministry documents said.

The prime minister said, "Instead of borrowing from others repeatedly, we have to develop our infrastructure with our own money... It will also benefit the country and give us confidence. We can show the world what we can do."

"As a developing country, we have to be self-reliant. We have to work with our own funds. We will improve our country and that is our goal. We need to do a lot more to achieve that goal."

The prime minister said the government's endeavour was to find ways to utilize the surplus forex reserve in profitable development works. "That's why we have thought of forming a fund from where the investors can take loans."

The country's reserve touched a new milestone of \$43 billion riding on robust flow of remittance, a fall in imports caused by the pandemic and a recent uptick in exports.

Bangladesh Bank Governor Fazle Kabir said, "Since we are graduating from the LDC to a developing nation, we need to keep a substantial amount in the reserve. Therefore, we must be vigilant in spending the fund."

He said the interest rates and other hidden costs of the loans that the country takes from foreign countries are quite large.

"If the fund from the forex reserves is used carefully, it will help the country save on foreign currencies," the governor said.

On July 6 last year, Sheikh Hasina talked about taking loans from the forex reserves at a meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecne).

She ordered preparing a guideline or roadmap based on detailed analysis of the viability of using a portion of

the forex reserves to provide loans for profitable projects.

In September, the central bank submitted a concept paper to the finance ministry on using the foreign exchange reserve.

After scrutinising the proposal, the government approved the BDIF.

During the signing ceremony, Finance Minister AHM Musfika Kamal said the BDIF will make the country's economy more self-reliant.

State Minister for Shipping Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury, Prime Minister's Principal Secretary Dr Ahmad Kaikaus, Sonali Bank Limited Chairman Ziaul Hasan Siddiqui, Senior Secretary of Finance Division Abdur Rouf Talukder, and Payra Port Authority Chairman Commodore Humayun Kallol were also present at the agreement signing ceremony.

DREDGING OF RABANABAD CHANNEL

On January 14, 2019, an agreement was signed between Payra Port authorities and Belgium-based Jan De Nul over the dredging of the Rabnabad channel.

However, the deal was scrapped on September 3, 2020, on the basis of the proposals of the Prime Minister's Office and Finance Division. The government decided to complete the dredging with its own fund instead.

As the dredging project would now be implemented with BDIF, its cost has reduced by Tk 5,608 crore, showed the documents of the finance division.

With the new funding, the depth of the channel would be increased to 10.5 metres. Once the dredging work completes, large vessels with the capacity of 3,000 TUE (twenty-foot equivalent unit) or 40,000 DWT (Deadweight tonnage) would be able to anchor at the port.

The Payra port is being constructed with an aim to develop the country's southern parts. The operational activities in the port started on a limited scale on August 13, 2016, and operation began formally in 2019.