

BANGLADESH UPDATE



1,899
New cases in 24hrs



5,66,838
Total cases



8,642
Deaths



5,19,141
Recoveries



GLOBAL UPDATE

2,706,020
Deaths



122,574,117
Total cases

FIRE AT ICU OF DMCH

It had no emergency evacuation system

SHAHEEN MOLLAH and
MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN

The intensive care unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital has no "emergency evacuation system".

An expert team was supposed to work to take critical patients to safety from the ICU in case an emergency arises. But no one came forward when a fire broke out at the ICU of the hospital's Covid-19 unit on Wednesday.

For the absence of ICU emergency evacuation plan, a mismanagement took place in shifting patients, claimed experts and relatives of patients.

Four people have died so far after the fire incident.

Brig Gen (ret'd) Ali Ahmed Khan, former director general of Fire Service and Civil Defence, said every hospital has to maintain a protocol and plan on shifting patients during ICU emergency incidents like fire and earthquake.

The plan includes a separate space where patients can be kept after being shifted, an in-house emergency response team of doctors, nurses, ward boys and cleaners to manage and shift patients with bed, he told The Daily Star on Thursday.

"But we did not see any evacuation plan at Dhaka Medical College Hospital and no one, expect the relatives, was seen shifting critical patients after fire broke out. For this reason, conditions of patients became more critical after they were shifted," said Ali Ahmed.

He said the Fire Service and Civil Defence issued directives to all hospitals to ensure the plan and continue holding emergency drills for the in-house team.

Analysing the DMCH fire incident, the former fire service DG said it seems that the hospital authorities did not provide any training to their staffers in this regard.

"We have come to know that the fire originated from a 'high-flow nasal cannula' and it can be doused at the beginning. But it seems that no one took any steps for extinguishing

the fire that spread later," he said.

Ali Ahmed alerted that if the hospital authorities do not follow the plan and train their staffers, this type of incidents may happen again in future.

Around 8:10am on Wednesday, a light bulb exploded near the ICU bed-12 at the Covid-19 unit of DMCH new building and smoke started spreading out from it.

There are 14 beds in the ICU set up for Covid-19 patients after the pandemic hit the country last year.

Soon after the incident, doctors and nurses started coming out of the ICU unit quickly, leaving the patients behind. Patients were asking for help, but none came forward to assist them, claimed relatives.

Talking to this paper on Thursday, several relatives claimed that they had to shift patients on their own without oxygen support from the ICU which deteriorated the patients' condition.

The hospital staffers even did not provide support to patients after they were shifted, alleged some relatives.

Visiting the hospital in the last two days, it was found that the fire extinguishers in the building are also date-expired.

Three committees have been formed to investigate the fire incident.

Nur Hasan, chief of the four-member investigation committee formed by fire service, told The Daily Star that they visited the spot and recorded statements of witnesses.

He said the investigation is underway, but they are yet to ascertain how the fire originated.

Asked about the use of fire extinguishers and other instruments, the fire service official said they would check it during their next visit.

Regarding the evacuation plan and response team, Brig Gen Nazmul Haque, director of the DMCH, however, said they have an evacuation protocol and also have a trained the response team, but it did not work properly during the incident.

About the fire extinguishers, the hospital director said the probe body will check those.

ICU demand keeps rising

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ICU beds," Brig Gen Dr Nazmul Haque, director of Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) told The Daily Star yesterday.

In the DMCH Covid-19 unit, only seven ICU beds out of 20 were vacant yesterday. Due to Wednesday's fire incident, a 14-bed ICU ward in DMCH Covid-19 unit were closed.

"We will need one month to resume [operating] the damaged ICU ward," Brig Gen Dr Nazmul Haque said.

In the Kuwait-Bangladesh Friendship Government Hospital, the first Covid-19-dedicated hospital in the country, only one of the 15 ICU beds were vacant yesterday while there was no vacancy in the 10-bed ICU ward in Kurmitola General Hospital.

Meanwhile, a total of 24 ICU beds were vacant out of 45 in the port city of Chattogram.

There are a total of 558 ICU beds for Covid-19 patients in the country. Of those, 273 were vacant yesterday.

Out of more than 10,000 general beds for Covid-19 patients across the country, a total of 2,522 patients were undergoing treatment.

Meanwhile, 18 people died from Covid-19 in 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday, raising the total death count to 8,642.

The death rate now stands at 1.52 percent.

After testing 18,917 samples across the country, a total of 1,899 new infections were recorded in the meantime taking the total number of people infected to 5,66,838.

With 1,618 Covid-19 patients recovering yesterday, the total number of recoveries now stands at 5,19,141 and the recovery rate at 91.59 percent.

Among the 18 deceased, 11 were male and seven female.

One of them was aged between 31 and 40 years, two between 41 and 50, three between 51 and 60 and 12 were above 60 years old, added the release.

WB APPROVES \$500M FOR VACCINATION

The World Bank yesterday approved \$500 million in financing from the International Development Association (IDA) to help Bangladesh vaccinate 54 million people against Covid-19.

The allocation comes at a time when a countrywide inoculation campaign is underway.

In a press release, the World Bank said the additional financing to the Covid-19 Emergency Response and Pandemic Preparedness Project will help Bangladesh procure safe and effective vaccines, expand vaccine

storage facilities, and distribute vaccines to about 31 percent of its population, in support of the government's prioritised plan of covering 40 percent of the population in the first phase of vaccination.

"Bangladesh has taken quick action to combat Covid-19 by rolling out a national vaccination programme. To achieve the objectives of the programme, fast and equitable access to vaccines will be important," said Mercy Tembon, World Bank Country Director for Bangladesh and Bhutan.

"This financing will help Bangladesh strengthen its national systems to ensure the prompt delivery of vaccines to one-third of its population."

The financing will cover the cost of deployment of the vaccines acquired through the Covid-19 Vaccine Global Access Facility (COVAX) for about 20 percent of the population.

For the remaining 11 percent of the population, the financing will cover direct purchases of vaccines from manufacturers or through COVAX, and the costs related to administering the vaccination. In parallel, the government is purchasing vaccines using its own resources that will cover another 9 percent of the population.

From COVAX, the country will get 6.8 crore shots of Covid-19 vaccines, according to health officials. The first consignment will reach the country by May-June this year.

So far, Bangladesh has purchased three crore shots of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine from Serum Institute of India and received another 20 lakh shots of the same vaccine as gift from the Indian government.

"Building on Bangladesh's long and successful history of managing child immunisation programs, the financing will play a critical role in getting those who need it most immunised against Covid-19," said Iffat Mahmud, World Bank senior operations officer and task team leader for the Project.

"The project will continue to support setting-up of testing laboratories and expand provision of intensive care at the district level."

With this additional financing, the World Bank's support to the project now stands at \$600 million. In addition, the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) is providing \$100 million for this project.

The IDA credit has a 30-year term, including a five-year grace period.

This additional financing for Bangladesh is one of three projects in a first phase of support for the Covid-19 vaccination effort across the South Asia region.



BCS EXAM AMID PANDEMIC

Jobseekers queue up at an entrance to Viqarunnisa Noon School and College in the capital's Shiddeshwari to take the 41st BCS preliminary exam yesterday. Sitting on the pavement, another group is doing last-minute revision for the exam. The preliminary exam was held in eight divisional cities.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Bangladesh is flourishing

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earlier in the day on a two-day visit.

Rajapaksa said Bangabandhu was a person of principle who dedicated his whole life for the people of this land. He was determined to establish an independent nation, but unfortunately, his and most of his family members' lives were cut short.

"Today, under the leadership of Prime Minister Hasina, daughter of Bangabandhu, Bangladesh is flourishing," he said yesterday, which was the third day of the 10-day celebrations.

Hasina presided over the discussion part of the event which was also addressed by State Minister for Cultural Affairs KM Khalid. Dhaka University English department's Prof Dr Syed Manzoorul Islam presented the keynote speech on yesterday's topic "As long as the Padma, Jamuna flow on", while Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov delivered a recorded video message.

Yesterday's celebrations began with the national anthem performed by students of Govt School of Hearing Impaired in sign language. It was followed by recitation from the holy books, screening of an animated film on the life and struggles of Bangabandhu, a theme song performed by noted singers and an audio-visual titled "Jotokal Robe Padma, Jamuna".

Rajapaksa is the second world leader to have joined the celebrations after the Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih. Rajapaksa landed at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport around 10:00am and was welcomed by PM Hasina.

A smartly turned-out contingent drawn from the army, the navy and the air force gave him a guard of honour.

He then paid respect to the memories of freedom fighters at the National Martyrs' Memorial in Savar. Rajapaksa signed the visitor's book at the memorial and planted saplings of jasmine on its premises.

Later, he joined the celebration at the parade ground that began at 4:30pm.

Addressing the event, he said he was delighted to have joined the occasion that has historic significance and thanked Prime Minister Hasina for the cordial invitation and welcome. He said he brings the message of solidarity from the Sri Lankans.

Stressing that the people of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have a long historic tie through maritime routes, he said the tie has now become even stronger. Sri Lanka is also one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relationship with Bangladesh.

Referring to the incomparable sacrifices of Bangabandhu, Rajapaksa

said, "Our generation need to remember the sacrifices of the forefathers."

He said Sri Lanka stands by Bangladesh. Both the countries are striving to eradicate poverty, improve blue economy, trade and commerce.

The Sri Lankan PM said Bangladesh has made great strides in agriculture and has even provided training through Saarc Agriculture Centre to the neighbours. "Bangladesh's journey of eradicating poverty is inspiring."

Hasina expressed gratitude to the Sri Lankan PM for joining the programme, saying this reflects the friendship the two countries have.

Bangladesh and Sri Lanka take similar position on issues in the international forums and support each other. "We hope this friendship will continue."

The PM also recalled the contribution of Russia in the Liberation War and in the establishment of a nuclear power plant in Bangladesh.

In his video message, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov termed Bangabandhu an outstanding leader and said he had visited Russia only two months after becoming prime minister in 1972 -- something that reflects his deep relationship with Russia.

He said Russia offered political support to Bangladesh's Liberation War and is now happy to see the country making considerable progress, while improving its reputation in the global arena by its efforts of resolving conflicts through multilateral mechanisms.

Russia is helping develop the country's first nuclear power plant in Rooppur, which could be operational in 2023-24, Lavrov said, adding: "Bangladesh is Russia's important partner in South Asia. Russia will continue to provide political and economic support to Bangladesh."

Lavrov said on request of the government of Bangladesh, in April 1972, the 12th special-purpose company of the USSR Navy was dispatched to Bangladesh to perform mine and shipwreck clearance of the port of Chittagong.

"Soviet navy sailors lived up to their task," he recalled.

"It is heartening that our Bangladeshi friends have carried the memory of this feat through half a century... such a careful attitude towards our common history is highly commendable."

Termining Bangladesh as Russia's important economic partner in South Asia, he said, "Last year, despite the coronavirus pandemic, the turnover between our two states saw a nearly 15 percent increase, exceeding an all-time record mark of US 2.4 billion [dollars]."

PM Hasina also thanked the Chinese and the Maldives presidents, prime

ministers of Canada and Japan for their messages on the occasion on March 17.

She became emotional as she spoke of the brutal killings of her father, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, her mother, younger brothers and other relatives on August 15, 1975.

She said the peoples' right was snatched through the assassination and conspirators tried to erase the name of Bangabandhu from the history.

Describing how Bangabandhu felt the sufferings of the people and loved them and spent his whole life fighting for peoples' causes, PM Hasina said, "My mother always inspired him to do what his heart spoke. That's why my father could work so much for people."

The conspirators did not allow Bangabandhu to see his dreams come true, she said, adding that she is thankful to the people who elected and allowed her to work for establishing Bangladesh as a prosperous country.

"On the 101st year of Bangabandhu's birth, we are pledge-bound to enlighten all with education and ensure food, housing, clothes and healthcare for them," she said.

Prof Syed Manzoorul Islam said how Bangabandhu, who grew up in a rural and remote part of the country, became a globally-acclaimed leader is a matter of research. There were numerous efforts to erase his name from history, but he is a part of global history today.

"In-depth studies of Bangabandhu's political and historical thoughts can help us all better implement his ideas," he said.

Apart from leading the Liberation War, Bangabandhu tackled some of the major issues after independence. Those include repatriation of refugees from India, reconstruction of war-ravaged infrastructure and economy and establishing Bangladesh's position in the international arena.

Also, Bangabandhu gifted the nation a constitution based on equity and democracy, established Bangladesh as part of a Non-Aligned Movement and gave frameworks for agriculture revolution and education policy.

"That was possible only for Bangabandhu. He accomplished the impossible. Bangladesh will go ahead, tackling any challenges on the way," Prof Manzoorul added at the event, moderated by Nobonita Chowdhury.

BSS adds: the nation will celebrate the fourth day of the 10-day programme with the theme "Tarunner Alokhikha" today.

Television channels, including the state-run BTV, alongside their streaming online and social media will telecast the programme live from the National Parade Square in the city, said a press release.

Dhaka, Colombo to sign 5 MoUs

Areas include trade, investment, shipping

PORIMOL PALMA

Dhaka and Colombo are expected to sign at least five MoUs today to bolster the bilateral relationship in the areas of trade, investment and coastal shipping.

The MoUs will be inked during a meeting between Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her Sri Lankan counterpart Mahinda Rajapaksa. The areas of the deals include coastal shipping, preferential trade, and promotion and protection of investment.

The issues were discussed in a meeting between visiting PM Rajapaksa and Bangladesh Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen at the Pan Pacific Sonargaon Dhaka yesterday.

The absolute value of exports from Sri Lanka to Bangladesh increased from \$10 million in 2000 to a peak of \$133 million in 2018, while Sri Lankan imports from Bangladesh have risen from \$4 million in 2000 to \$37 million in 2019.

"If you talk about exporting to Sri

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Procession in city protesting Modi's visit

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Agitators brought out a procession following Jumma prayers at Baitul Mukarram National Mosque in the capital's Paltan area yesterday protesting the upcoming visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Modi is expected to come to Bangladesh on March 26 to attend the celebrations of the birth centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the golden jubilee of independence of Bangladesh.

Witnesses said at least a thousand protesters staged demonstrations from 1:45pm till 2:30pm in the area. They brought out a procession from the mosque which marched through Kakrail, Bijoyagar and ended at Purana Paltan area.

During the procession, agitators were heard chanting slogans against Modi's upcoming visit.

Before the procession, the agitators held a short rally on the steps of the national mosque. During the rally, protestors chased camerapersons of two private television channels -- Ekattor Television and DBC News -- terming them atheists and Indian supporters.

The crew members of the channels left the spot and were not seen in the area since.

This correspondent saw a huge number of police personnel deployed near the mosque since yesterday morning to avoid any untoward incident.

When agitators brought out a procession, police personnel at first were seen trying to stop them, but eventually had to let them go ahead with the procession as they started throwing bricks soon after a barricade was put up.

The agitators had no banner with them but talking with journalists they claimed they are supporters of various Islamic parties.

Syed Nurul Islam, deputy commissioner of Motijheel Division Police, said no untoward incidents took place during the demo and the situation was under control.

"The agitators threw some bricks primarily but no one was hurt," he added.

Caught in the crunch

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worsened by its US dollar shortage due to the drop in cash injections from Lebanese expatriates abroad in the later part of last year, according to reports by international media.

These led to a drop in the Lebanon central bank's foreign currency reserves and thus to a shortage in dollars for businesses and individuals. Banks there then put restrictions on withdrawals of depositors and their transfers from Lebanese pounds to US dollars, media reports said.

For decades, Lebanon was one of the few countries in the world that maintained a fixed -- rather than floating -- exchange rate for its currency.

The Lebanese pound (or lira) was pegged at 1,507 to the US dollar, with the central bank subsidising the difference, as well as the import of many staple goods, from fuel to flour, said an Al Jazeera report in February.

Exchange houses and banks are now mandated by the government to trade at 3,900 Lebanese pounds to the US dollar. However, the 1,507 rate is still used for the purchase of some goods, such as fuel, the report stated.

On the other hand, Beirut-based The Daily Star reported the US dollar was traded at 8,900 Lebanese pounds on the black market on February 8.

On March 2, it was trading at nearly 10,000 Lebanese pounds to the dollar on the black market, TRT World reported, citing AFP.

Plagued by this crisis, 5,990 migrant workers have applied for repatriation via the Bangladesh mission, as of

yesterday, while several thousand others were waiting to be included in the registration process.

According to the Bangladesh mission in Beirut, as of yesterday, more than 4,600 of the registered workers have been repatriated in special flights starting from February 15.

WORKERS UNABLE TO PAY AIRFARE HOME

In the present situation, one needs to arrange more than three million Lebanese pounds to get \$400 on the black market -- which for some workers, is nearly impossible to save from a year's earnings, said 50-year-old Shahid Ullah. Talking with this newspaper on March 5, Shahid was then waiting to be repatriated home.

He added that around 10,000 Bangladeshi workers, in addition to those already registered, were waiting to return home amid the present economic situation in Lebanon -- but many of them are unable to manage the \$400 airfare.

As a result, many could not register their names for repatriation, said Shahid, who lived in Lebanon for more than two decades.

He urged the Bangladesh government to support migrant workers who are unable to pay airfare and partially reimburse those who have already paid the money for repatriation. Shahid has since returned to Bangladesh on March 13.

While registering undocumented workers for repatriation in December last year, the Bangladesh embassy in Beirut asked applicants to pay \$400 as airfare (for adults aged above 18)

alongside a fee or fine of 1.4 lakh Lebanese pounds.

The airfare payment had to be in US dollars, according to a notice of the mission posted on Facebook.

Asked, Abdullah Al Mamun, first secretary of the labour welfare wing at the Bangladesh embassy in Beirut, said the payment requirement in dollars was made by the airline concerned.

Over WhatsApp, Mamun, also the mission's head of chancery, told this correspondent they will continue the registration process in the coming days. Next month, the repatriation process is set to get underway for another 1,500 undocumented workers, he added.

Of around 1.20 lakh-1.30 lakh Bangladeshi migrant workers currently living in Lebanon, 25,000-30,000 are estimated to be undocumented, said the official.

Another official at the embassy said more or less all Bangladeshi workers in Lebanon are facing the crunch due to the economic downfall.

Although the coronavirus pandemic put Lebanon in lockdown, the bigger problem is the existing economic and political crisis, he said, requesting anonymity.

He said although many workers' monthly earnings have recently increased, it proved to be "insufficient".

Lebanon's economy has been on the downturn while there was no effective formation of a new government. So, it could be said that the overall situation in Lebanon is undergoing a crisis, he added. Shariful Hasan, head of Bra's migration programme, said Lebanon's

economic fallout, the US dollar crisis, and lack of governance had been impacting Bangladeshi migrant workers for the last one and a half years.

It worsened after the Beirut explosion in August last year, he told this newspaper.

"Now, many [migrant workers] are on the brink of job loss. They are unable to meet daily expenses and want to return," he added.

Shariful said as Lebanon's economic revival is uncertain, Bangladesh should be careful and rethink whether it will send new workers there.

He said to resolve workers' financial issues, the ministry or embassy needs to approach their companies to ensure that airfare and dues are paid by the companies.

If a company fails to pay airfares due to bankruptcy, then the Bangladesh government has to arrange flights for the returning workers and consider paying their airfare, he added.

DECLINE IN REMITTANCE
Amid Lebanon's economic downturn, remittance inflow from the Middle East country dropped in the past couple of years.

Bangladesh received about \$126.85 million in remittance from Lebanon in the 2018-2019 fiscal year, according to Bangladesh Bank data.

Inward remittance from Lebanon dropped to \$86.99 million in the 2019-2020 fiscal year, and in the first two quarters of the current fiscal year, inward remittance from Lebanon was \$36.71 million, according to the central bank data.