

BANGLADESH UPDATE



2,172
New cases in 24hrs



5,70,878
Total cases



8,690
Deaths



5,22,739
Recoveries



2,725,152
Deaths



123,711,949
Total cases

Celebrate so that it helps people

PM urges AL, its affiliates

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, also president of the Awami League, has urged the party leaders, activists, and associate bodies to observe Mujib Borsho in a manner that benefits mass people.

"We'll have to celebrate the time [Mujib Borsho] in a way so that the mass people of the country get its benefits. Simultaneously, we'll have to move on with our festivities.

"So, we'll arrange these programmes till next December 16, marking the Mujib Borsho and the Golden Jubilee of Independence," she said while addressing a virtual discussion yesterday.

Bangladesh Awami League arranged the discussion at its Bangabandhu Avenue central office, marking the 101st birth anniversary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the National Children Day 2021.

Hasina chaired the function, joining it virtually from her official residence the Gono Bhavan.

The PM also asked the AL and its associate bodies to take separate programmes like cultural ones, discussions, essay and other competitions, Doa Mahfil, tree



plantation, particularly programmes for supporting the poor up to the grassroots level to observe the Mujib Borsho after the conclusion of the ongoing 10-day national celebration.

"Our every associate body alongside the AL will have to take separate programmes after the national celebration [after March 26]. Take different programmes not only in Dhaka city but also at the grassroots levels -- Union, Upazila and Zila levels," said the AL president.

About the assistance programmes for the poor, she said the most important thing is to help the poor.

"We'll have to alleviate the sufferings as much as possible; what the poor are facing due to coronavirus. You [the party men] did it as well. The assistance work was done in our country. But we'll have to continue it," she said.

Hasina asked her party's all leaders and activists to continue its tree plantation drive in the Mujib Borsho.

"We perhaps could not arrange a big programme making mass gathering to celebrate the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation, but we took a tree plantation campaign and planted a huge number of trees," she said.



Three women and some children sitting in the shade of a water purifying plant in Deluti union of Khulna's Paikgacha upazila. They are waiting to buy purified water at 40 paisa per litre. A recent study found that 73 percent of the people living in five coastal upazilas -- Koyra, Dacope, Paikgachha of Khulna and Assasuni and Shyamnagar of Satkhira -- have to drink unsafe saline water.

PHOTO: DIPANKAR ROY

Cry for water in the south

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over 50, said, wiping sweat off her face with her left hand.

Despite all these hard work, Roksana's family, which lives in Madarbaria village of Khulna's Koyra upazila, gets to drink saline water. Their consolation is the water of the pond is a bit less saline than what many others get.

Sushama Sarkar, 53, of Hatiardanga village of Koyra, travels to a pond, which is two kilometres away from her home. Carrying the heavy pitcher, she suffers from back pain frequently.

"Some buy water but we can't afford it... It also hasn't rained in the last several months," she said.

A recent UNDP survey has highlighted the plight of the country's coastal people regarding safe drinking water. It said 73 percent of the people living in five coastal upazilas -- Koyra, Dacope, Paikgachha of Khulna and Assasuni and Shyamnagar of Satkhira -- have to drink unsafe saline water.

Though the permissible salinity level in drinking water is 1,000mg per litre, those people, on average, consume water with salinity level between 1,427mg and 2,406mg per litre, reveals the survey.

In the dry season or winter, the salinity level of tubewell water in Shyamnagar goes up to 6,600mg per litre, more than six times the permissible limit.

The survey was carried out on 66,234 households of 271,464 people living in 39 unions of the five coastal upazilas, under a project, titled "Gender-responsive Coastal Adaptation (GCA)".

The study, which ended in February, also found that 63 percent of the people face difficulties even in getting that water as they have no other source of drinking water.

In 74 percent households surveyed, women are solely responsible for collecting the drinking water while in 10 percent households males take on the responsibility. The task is shared by the male and female members of the families in rest of the households.

Many spend more than two

hours daily to collect drinking water. Sometimes, they need to go more than a kilometre to fetch the water, either from a tubewell or a pond.

People in more than 16 percent households surveyed said they have to walk even more.

The study also found that among the people's available drinking water sources, the salinity level of 52 percent ponds was higher than the salinity level of ponds elsewhere in the country. It was the same for 77 percent tubewells in the coastal region.

On average, the salinity level of tubewell water is 2,406mg in Dacope, 1,453mg in Koyra, 1,510mg in Paikgachha, 998mg in Assasuni and 1,683mg in Shyamnagar.

For ponds, it is on average 650mg in Dacope, 1,024mg in Koyra, 1,581mg in Paikgachha, 1,203mg in Assasuni and 1,184mg in Shyamnagar.

Also people living there have to spend more than those in the capital for drinking water, the survey revealed. It converted the time spent for fetching the water into monetary value based on the wages of the government programme of Kajer Binimoye Khaddo (Food for Work), and said when people spend one hour for the task, it actually costs them Tk 1,875 a month. If it is more than two hours, the cost rises to Tk 2,463.

On the contrary, Dhaka Wasa charges each household Tk 200 monthly for water.

Asked what interventions were required to improve the situation in the coastal area, Alamgir Hossain, coordinator of the survey project, funded by the Green Climate Fund and the Bangladesh government, said they support climate resilient drinking water supply through rainwater harvesting.

Replying to a query on the health impact caused by consuming the saline water, he said they would assess the impact at a later part of the project.

However, there has already been notable health impacts, including high blood pressure, skin diseases, indigestion, diarrhoea, he added.

As river water started to become

saline nearly three decades ago, people living in these coastal upazilas mainly depend on ponds and tubewells for drinking water.

Many freshwater ponds were damaged at least four decades ago due to saltwater shrimp farming in some areas.

Due to cyclone Aila in 2009, many ponds became full of salt water. Most have remained so for even more than a decade. Cyclone Amphan caused a similar havoc.

Lately, salt water is being found in different tiers of the ground there, Alamgir added.

Pritish Mondal, an engineer of Public Health Engineering Department, said, "There is no shortage of water in the upazilas. But all the water is saline water," he said.

Akml Hosen, executive engineer of DPHE told The Daily Star that around 35 percent people of Khulna district get safe drinking water. Rest of them depend on ponds or other sources.

Shahidul Islam, the director of NGO Uttaran and a native of Satkhira, said, "As you travel around the villages in most of the upazilas of the district, you will see there are many deep-tube wells that have been set up to ensure drinking water for the villagers, but they simply don't work."

Dilip Kumar Datta, professor of Khulna University, said the impact of brackish water has always been in the south-west of the country. Gradually, the salinity level is increasing in rivers, ponds and other water bodies, he said.

When asked how the salinity problem could be resolved, Ainun Nishat, Professor Emeritus of Brac university, said, "You need to build the Ganges barrage."

"It is also the number one project of the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100. The government could build the Ganges barrage in collaboration with India."

He also said, "As far as I know, India is very keen on supporting Bangladesh on this. Because India has realised that the Ganges barrage is very important to save the Sundarbans and the reduce salinity in this region."

Jordan keen on boosting ties with Bangladesh

Deputy PM Safadi says in message during twin celebrations

BSS, Dhaka

Jordanian Deputy Prime Minister Ayman Safadi yesterday said his country is interested in enhancing cooperation with Bangladesh to address regional challenges.

"We also look forward to increasing cooperation and taking efforts to overcome regional challenges, including refugee (crisis) and fight against terrorism..." said Safadi, also the foreign and expatriates minister, in a video message.

On behalf of the king of Jordan, the recorded video message of the Jordanian deputy prime minister was broadcast at a function on the fifth day of the 10-day special programmes marking the birth centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the golden jubilee of the country's independence.

Safadi said he was honoured to convey the warmest congratulations of Jordan King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein on the occasion of the golden jubilee of the Bangladesh's independence and Mujib Borsho.

"I wish to continue to bless Bangladesh for its progress, stability and prosperity," he said.

Pointing out the existing excellent ties between the two Muslim countries, the Jordan deputy PM said it is a relationship that continues to grow both bilateral and beyond, including the OIC, where the both countries work for cooperation, security, and stability for the world.

"We look forward to advancing mutual beneficial cooperation alongside the bilateral ties," he said.

Safadi highly praised Bangladesh's tremendous progress in the last five decades.

"We're confident that the future will see Bangladesh making even more strides in consolidating stability, achieving more development and realising the great potential of its people," he added.

Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader, Information and Broadcasting Minister Hasan Mahmud and eminent historian Prof Syed Anwar Hossain also spoke at the function.

Three held over inviting Hindus to convert

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Magura

Police in Magura have detained three people for interrogation after panic spread in the local Hindu community following the distribution of letters inviting Hindus to Islam.

The detainees are Yousuf Hossain, 35, of Chowgachi village, Korban Mollah, 42, of Moheshpur village, and Habibur Rahman, 42, of Dariapur village, of the district.

Officer-in-charge of Sreepur Police Station Ali Ahmed Masud said the three persons have been held for interrogation in this regard.

Korban works in a community clinic in Moheshpur village and Habibur runs a library at Chasilapur Bazar. On Friday night, some Muslim locals distributed letters referring to the verses of the Holy Quran among the Hindu community.

They distributed 50 letters in Malainagar, Chargoaldah, Goadah, and Anandanagar villages.

The letter, a copy of which The Daily Star obtained, sought to persuade Hindus to come to Islam so that they could have an afterlife.

As panic spread among the Hindu community, Saifuzzaman Shikhor, a ruling party lawmaker from Magura-1, went to a meeting with members of the Hindu community at Chargoaldah village on Saturday night and told them not to panic.

Niranjon Mondol, a shopkeeper of Malainagar village, told this correspondent that around 8:30pm on Friday, one Habibur Rahman -- clad in a panjabi and pyjama -- gave him a letter and said Niranjon was invited to their meeting at Chowgachi Moktab.

Golok Chandra Mondol of Chargoaldah village said he and other members of the Hindu community were fearing an attack.

Another villager, Amal Kumar Sarkar, echoed Golok's statement.

France rescues 72 migrants in Channel on way to UK

AFP, Lille

French maritime authorities said they had rescued 72 migrants in the English Channel yesterday whose vessels ran into difficulties as they tried to reach the UK.

Early yesterday, the coastguard was alerted that several boats were in trouble off the coast of Calais.

One was picked up by a French patrol boat and the 38 people on board taken to Calais.

Meanwhile, 34 more migrants were rescued by a tugboat operated by the French navy and taken to Boulogne-sur-Mer, also on France's Channel coast.

Nepal president arrives today

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Solih and Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa who joined the mega event that began at the National Parade Square on March 17.

This is the first presidential visit by Nepal to Bangladesh. Bangladesh President Abdul Hamid visited Nepal in November 2019.

President Hamid will receive his Nepalese counterpart Bhandari at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport around 10:00am. After receiving a 21-gun salute, she will be given a guard of honour.

From the airport, the Nepalese president will visit the National Martyrs' Memorial in Savar to pay tribute to the Liberation War heroes by placing wreaths. She will sign the visitors' book there and plant a sapling.

She will also visit Bangabandhu Memorial Museum in Dhanmondi to pay tribute to Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The Nepalese delegation accompanying the president will consist of Minister for Foreign Affairs Pradeep Kumar Gyawali and secretaries

and senior officials of the ministry, the Office of the President and other relevant ministries.

President Bhandari will deliver a speech titled "Nepal-Bangladesh Relations and Bangabandhu's Birth Centenary" at the celebrations this afternoon.

She will also hold talks with President Hamid at the Bangabhaban. Several MoUs are expected to be signed between the two countries on tourism, cultural exchange, trade, and connectivity.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen are scheduled to call on the Nepalese president.

President Bhandari is also scheduled to visit the Embassy of Nepal, meet its nationals in Bangladesh and attend a luncheon to be hosted by the Nepalese ambassador in Bangladesh.

She will return home Tuesday afternoon. Foreign Minister Momen will see her off at the airport.

Bhutanese Prime Minister Lotay Tshering is scheduled to arrive tomorrow and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on March 26.

Sharp rise in infection rate

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Yesterday, a total of 2,172 people were found to be infected with the novel coronavirus after testing 21,108 samples across the country.

With the latest count, the total number of novel coronavirus cases rose to 5,70,878 since the first three patients were detected in the country in March 8 last year.

In the same 24 hours, 22 Covid-19 patients died due to the viral infection, raising the total number of deaths to 8,690.

Meanwhile, the total number of people vaccinated rose to 48,40,969 as new 80,222 people received Covid-19 vaccines yesterday.

Health officials said, they will start administering second dose of Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines from April 8.

"Those who have received the first dose will start receiving the second dose from April 8. They will receive information via text message to their mobile phone number," said Prof Meerjady Sabrina Flora, additional

director general (planning and development) of the health directorate said following an event at the Central Medicine Store Depot (CMSD) in Dhaka.

She said that the vaccination campaign has been expanded after ensuring the every vaccine recipient receives second dose.

Asked whether the UK variant has contributed to the fresh surge of Covid-19, she said, "The transmission rate broadly depends on whether people are maintaining health safety guidelines. But, for sure, there is an impact of the UK variant. So there is no alternative to maintaining health safety guidelines."

Meanwhile, the next consignment of Oxford vaccine from the Serum Institute of India may reach the country by the end of this month, health secretary Abdul Mannan said yesterday.

"However, it may be late... could be the first week of April," Abdul Mannan said while addressing as chief guest in the same event at the CMSD.

Researchers find 34 unique

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Of those, most were found in Dhaka, Chattogram and Chandpur regions. And three unique mutations were detected in each of the three regions, according to the study published in the international journal, Virus Research, recently.

The study was led by three Bangladeshi researchers -- Adnan Mannan, associate professor of genetic engineering and biotechnology at Chittagong University; Mahbub Hasan, assistant professor of the same department at the CU; and Rasel Das, assistant professor of biochemistry and biotechnology at the University of Science and Technology Chittagong.

AMAM Junaid Siddique, head of pathology department at Chattogram Veterinary and Animal Sciences University; and SM Mahbub Rashid, assistant professor of genetic engineering and biotechnology at Dhaka University, supervised the research.

Two students from Monash University in Malaysia, and three students from the CU contributed to data analysis.

Talking to The Daily Star, Adnan said there were 34 unique mutations in the country and those must be

studied further to see whether those are responsible for the current rise in Covid infections and also whether those are more potent or weaker than the previous ones in spreading infections.

Nearly 1,000 of the 4,604 mutations were detected in Chattogram region and those matched the ones found in Saudi Arabia and other Middle East countries, European nations, the US and Australia. The rest of the mutations found in other parts of Bangladesh were similar to those detected in European countries, he mentioned.

Rasel Das said the study would work as a guiding hand for further research to find out whether the Covid vaccines are effective against new strains.

Echoing his view, Mahbub Hasan said it is important to carry out more research on the unique mutations found in the country to be sure if any of those has the potential to cause more harm.

Junaid Siddique said respiratory specimens should be collected from those who are coming from abroad and critical Covid patients to know whether they are infected with any new Covid strain and whether vaccines are effective against those.

Why so hush-hush?

FROM PAGE 1

It was also the case with the South African variant, found in the country in February. But the government is yet to acknowledge it officially.

The government's approach in this case does not seem to emphasise the free flow of information or getting the right information through to the people at the right time, which is crucial in tackling such a pandemic.

Because when the truth is concealed, rumours spread.

Sensing the importance of accurate information during the pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) has already warned of misinformation as an "infodemic".

But from the way health officials have handled the two variants, it appears that the knowledge was for their own consumption.

The outcome is damaging to say the least.

With things developing rapidly over the last two weeks, fear has replaced the feel-good atmosphere. The daily number of infections has risen sharply, and the positivity rate has already crossed 10 percent. The number of deaths has also been rising, as have hospital admissions and ICU occupancy.

Experts have said if health officials disclosed the presence of the two contagious variants immediately after detection and made people aware of their damaging impacts, the situation could have been different.

Both the UK and South African variants spread faster than the other strains, and are reported to be responsible for the fresh wave of infections and deaths across the world.

When the UK variant was causing

a surge in infections and fatalities in the United Kingdom, 40 countries including India, imposed temporary bans on UK arrivals in their respective countries in late December last year. Europe also temporarily closed its borders with the UK at that time.

But Bangladesh kept its airports open for people flying in from the UK, despite concern from experts. They said the country would commit the same mistake it did by allowing Bangladeshi expats from Europe to return home during the initial days of the pandemic last year.

When the UK variant was found in the country in January, the daily positivity rate was falling. According to government data, the variants were found in samples taken from some UK returnees.

The picture was looking even brighter when the country began the mass rollout of Covid-19 vaccine on February 7, as the infection rate had already been hovering between 2.3 and 3.3 percent.

The vaccination programme was the result of a successful government diplomacy in vaccine procurement. With positivity rates and deaths going in the right direction and large numbers being vaccinated people began to move more freely, oblivious to the looming threat.

In February there was a three-day weekend and a huge number of tourists went to Cox's Bazar. There were reports that many tourists stayed at the beach and in buses as they did not find any vacant hotel rooms.

Health officials have said that infection rates have been on the rise since. They said they have been ringing the alarm bells, warning that