

BANGLADESH UPDATE



3,567
New cases in 24hrs



5,80,808
Total cases



8,763
Deaths



5,27,909
Recoveries



2,751,389
Deaths



125,164,400
Total cases

OBSERVING GENOCIDE DAY

Countrywide 1-minute blackout at 9:00pm

STAR REPORT

The government has declared several programmes to observe Genocide Day today and remember the brutalities of Pakistani occupation forces on unarmed Bangalees on the night of March 25, 1971.

The government has decided to observe a one-minute symbolic "blackout" from 9:00pm to 9:01pm throughout the country.

The key point installations (KPIs) and essential establishments will remain out of the purview of the programme.

On the occasion, the government has also imposed restrictions on lighting at all government, semi-government, autonomous, private buildings and structures on March 25 night. But lightings are allowed from the evening of March 26.

Marking the Genocide Day, newspapers will publish special supplements upholding the day's significance.

A discussion programme on the occasion of the day will be held at the National Museum in the morning.

Lyrical-dramas on genocide and the Liberation War as well as cultural programmes will take place across the country, said a PID handout.

Besides, remembrance by freedom fighters and noted personalities as well as discussions on March 25 genocide will take place at all educational

institutions including schools, colleges, and madrasas across the country.

Rare photographs and documentaries on genocide will be exhibited in all city corporations.

Also, special prayers for the salvation of the souls of those killed on the night of March 25, 1971, will take place at mosques after Zuhr prayers. Special prayers will also take place at all other places of worship. All countrymen and concerned public-private organisations have been requested to implement the programmes.

Meanwhile, President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina issued messages on the eve of Genocide Day.

In his message, President Abdul Hamid emphasised collective efforts to turn the country into "Sonar Bangla" as dreamt by the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, reported BSS.

"We can pay our eternal respect to every soul who gave his [or her] life in 1971 genocide, by turning the country into 'Sonar Bangla' as dreamt by Bangabandhu," he said.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in her message, said, "On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Day of Genocide, we pledge to uphold the freedom that we have earned in exchange for the three million martyrs and the respect of two hundred thousand tortured mothers and sisters, if necessary, in exchange for our supreme sacrifices," says a PID handout.

Government plans 258km

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consortium was originally assigned for the feasibility study and preliminary design of the 90km subway.

After the project was revised later, they carried out a feasibility study for a 238km subway network and made a preliminary design for the length of 90km at the cost of Tk 321 crore under a 35-month project.

In the draft feasibility study submitted on March 15, they proposed a 258km subway network consisting of 11 routes.

The government is developing a 128.74km elevated and underground metro rail network, comprising six metro rail lines, in the city and adjacent area. The aim is to complete the project by 2030.

In yesterday's presentation, the consultants said the MRT network should be complemented with a subway system for better coverage and connectivity.

As per the plan, the subway tunnel would be 30 metres below the surface. The tunnel boring machine and the stations would be developed with what documents said is a cut and cover method.

Once the subway is developed, half of the city's 80 lakh working people will use it, keeping roads free of congestion, Obaidul Quader said.

The 29.35km route, which is supposed to be implemented first, would be from Jhilmil-Teghoria Bazar-Sadarghat-Gulistan-Kakrail-BG Press-Rajanigandha market-Kalshi-Uttara Sector-17- Uttara Sector 14-Machimpur and Tongi.

BBA Chief Engineer Kazi Md Ferdous, also the project director, said the approximate cost of the route is \$8 billion. The exact cost will be known after a detailed design is formed.

The three other routes of the first phase are a 20.18km route from Gabtoli to Belabo, 19.31km from Keraniganj to Sonapur, and 34.98km from Jahangirnagar Uttara Sector-13 to Narayanganj via Bashundhara South and Fatulla Station.

BBA Executive Director Belayet Hossain, also the Bridge Division Secretary, said 65 percent of the feasibility

study has been done and the final report might be available by the next October.

A letter has been written to the Economic Relations Division to manage funds, he said, adding that many organisations have expressed interest in investing in the project.

Speaking at the programme, Abdul Baquee Miah, additional project director (civil) of MRT Line-6, said the proposed subway routes will go in parallel to MRT lines in many areas.

"Have they studied how they will manage it?" he asked, adding that the consultants did not say anything about how they will find the land.

He said the project would need a 200 metre by 50 metre land for a station using the open cut method. "How would they do this amid so many tall buildings?"

Three MRT lines will connect Gabtoli, he said, asking whether there is space for a subway line. Besides, MRT-2 is expected to reach Sadarghat, but the proposed subway would also have stations there. "Is there enough land there for these?"

The MRT project would not make profits from selling tickets only. On the other hand, the cost of the subway would be much higher than the MRT, he said. "How will it be feasible?"

Akter Mahmud, president of Bangladesh Institute of Planners, said a prospective plan of 2041 clearly stated about political, economic and administrative decentralisation of Dhaka city.

But, many mega projects are being implemented in Dhaka city, he added.

When a reporter said that the building of subway network has long been in discussion, but the option was not included in revised strategic transport plan for Dhaka approved in 2015, reportedly because it is not feasible for an unplanned city like Dhaka, Kazi Md Ferdous said they would build the subway to organise the disorganised city.

Belayet Hossain said his office sent the proposal to Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority to incorporate the subway in the RSTP.

Spanish Ambassador to Bangladesh Francisco de Asis Benitez Salas among others spoke at the programme.



Women footballers of Ansar waiting in front of Mugda General Hospital in the capital yesterday to get tested for coronavirus ahead of the 9th Bangabandhu Bangladesh Games scheduled to launch on April 1. The country is witnessing an unexpected rise in new cases.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

Never seen so many bodies

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get goosebumps recalling the bloodbath," said Rabindra.

On that fateful night, the Pakistan army launched the "Operation Searchlight" and mercilessly killed the Bangalee members of East Pakistan Rifles and police, students and teachers as well as thousands of common people in Dhaka city.

Jagannath Hall, a non-Muslim dormitory of Dhaka University, and Iqbal Hall, now renamed Sergeant Zohurul Haq Hall, Pilkhana, Rajarbagh Police Lines, and Hindu-dominated areas of Old Dhaka were the main targets of the ruthless military campaign.

As the nation recalls the night, the 65-year-old retired employee of Jagannath Hall shared his firsthand account of the atrocities with The Daily Star yesterday.

In 1971, his father, Ram Bihari Das, was a staff of the hall provost's office. The family used to live in the staff quarter by the western side of the boundary wall of the hall.

Around 20 other families lived there. Yards away, there was a tin-roofed dormitory for students.

Rabindra, then a class-eight student, said everything changed as soon as twilight descended on Jagannath Hall on March 25. A ghostly calm took hold of the entire campus.

In their two-room, tin-shed staff quarter at the hall, his family was discussing the tension that stemmed from Yahya Khan's dilly-dallying over handing over power to prime minister-elect Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The uneasiness turned into foreboding when they heard that people, particularly university students, started setting up barricades with trees, bricks and whatever else they could get.

Anxious, Rabindra, youngest son of Ram Bihari, was preparing to go to bed after dinner. Suddenly, some distant sounds of gunshots broke the stillness of the night.

"My elder brother told me: 'It might be coming from the Rajarbagh police station.' It was around 11:00pm," he said.

A little later, they heard more gunshots, this time from Pilkhana area. For the rest of the night, he experienced the brutalities of the Pakistan army on the hall students and staff.

"It was sheer luck that I survived," he said.

Going back to night, Rabindra said he came out of the room hearing the gunshots.

"Soldiers were surrounding the hall," he saw, as he cringed in fear.

He went back to the room and within seconds the power went off. Soon, tanks and truckloads of soldiers broke through the boundary wall opposite the UOTC building (now BNCC).

They also entered the dormitory through the north and the south gates and fanned out.

"There was firing and explosion.... It was deafening," said Rabindra.

Tracer fire lit up the night sky. The

sharp cracks of rifles with shelling of mortars were all around. Operation Searchlight had just begun.

"Amid constant sounds of gunshot, we heard screams and voices pleading for life," Rabindra said.

His elder brother Fanindra Mohan Das, a lab assistant of East Pakistan University of Engineering and Technology (now Buet), Fanindra's wife and their little son were also at home. His father used to stay in the office room at night.

Bullets were flying overhead; some struck the tin roof. Panicked, they hid under the cot, but the CRACK and BOOM got louder and louder. This continued for a while.

He was not ready for what came next. Around 2:30am, a group of seven to eight soldiers approached their home. They dragged night guard Shiba Pada Kuri along. He was crying and calling Rabindra's brother for help.

But before they could offer any help, the soldiers broke open their doors. "Tum log kaun ho? [who are you people?]," one soldier asked Fanindra. "Hum too sweeper hai sahey; drain saaf karte hai [we're sweepers, we clean drains]," he replied.

The soldiers asked, "Idhar malaun kidhar hai... chhatra kidhar hai? [where are the Hindus and the students?]"

He replied, "Yeha par koi chhatra hai nehi. Malaun chala gaya... [no student lives here. Hindus are all gone...]"

The army men then beat Fanindra with rifles and took him with them to search the rooms.

Fanindra could speak Urdu and English a bit, which he learnt while working at a telephone exchange. Rabindra too understood Urdu a bit and all the conversations between the soldier and his brother took place in front of him.

Around half an hour after taking his brother, who somehow managed to flee, the soldiers returned. This time around 25 of them. They set their home on fire. The family members came out and Rabindra ran towards the cowshed to rescue their five cows.

He took some of the cows out of the cowshed and tried to take them towards the corner of the playground for safety. Then he saw a huge number of soldiers taking position.

"I couldn't believe my eyes. The soldiers were all in position with arms. I was baffled and didn't know what to do," he said.

They caught him.

"They could have shot me. Instead they caught me," Rabindra said.

Thirty other people were caught. All of them, including Rabindra, were taken to a room used as a cowshed that belonged to Dabir Uddin, the then chief engineer of Dhaka University.

It was not dawn yet. One soldier drew a line in front of the door of the room and thundered in Urdu: "Iska bahar jaiyega to goli maar dunga [if you cross the line, we'll shoot you]."

"We were all like corpses," Rabindra said, adding that there were a few

students among the captives.

As the day broke, the soldiers came to the room. Out of the 31, they sorted 15 who were relatively healthier. They forced them to carry the bodies lying inside the halls and put those in a place used for students' long-jump game, a place later marked as the killing field.

Then the Pakistan army asked the 15 to stand in front of the dead and then shot them.

"We saw it from the room," Rabindra said, recalling those moments with his eyes closed. After a brief pause, he opened his eyes and went on: "I was trembling in fear, crying."

It was now the turn for the rest 16.

Three relatively older soldiers came and counted them: "one, two, three..." "I thought my time has come. Observing me intensely, one soldier hit my waist with his rifle. I was thrown a few feet away," he said.

Lying and groaning in pain, Rabindra tried to hide himself in a small hole-like place.

Then the soldiers took the 15 to the place and forced them to carry corpses from different places. This done, they lined them up and shot them down.

"It was all happening before my eyes," he said.

The soldiers waited there for 15 to 20 minutes and then left.

Rabindra came out of his hiding place and saw a man in the heap of bodies wave at him. He ran to him. The man wanted some water. Rabindra rushed to the pond, about 100 yards from the place. He cupped his hands and tried to bring some water. But by the time he reached where the man was lying, all the water dripped through his fingers.

Then he found a broken pot and carried some water to him. But the man breathed his last as he tried to pour some in his mouth.

After the soldiers left, those who survived the massacre started looking for their loved ones. But there was hardly anyone around, only bodies and scattered flesh.

"Oh! I've never seen so many dead bodies," said Rabindra.

But he is lucky by all counts. His father, brother, sister-in-law and nephew were all alive. In the afternoon, they left the hall fearing that the soldiers would return.

Talking to the Daily Star, former provost of Jagannath Hall Dr Asim Sarkar said the actual figure of casualties at the dormitory from the Operation Searchlight is yet not known.

"We have constructed a memorial plaque where four teachers and 63 students and university staffers were mentioned," he said.

As Bangladesh is celebrating the golden jubilee of independence, Rabindra said, "The magnificent achievement that the country has had after 50 years is what makes me proud and happy."

"But at the same time, it hurts me when I see some betrayers are still out there roaming freely," he said.

Infections

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not yet taken all-out measures to tackle the situation. It is not showing the urgency like it did in November last year to encourage people to follow health safety guidelines. Besides, surveillance activities to detect and isolate new cases are not adequate."

At a meeting with high-ups of the Prime Minister's Office last week, the health directorate placed a set of recommendations to keep the virus transmission in check. Those include a lockdown across the country, restrictions on mass gatherings and programmes, and limiting opening hours of markets and shopping malls.

It also called for strengthening screening at all entry points to the country -- airports, seaports and land ports -- and quarantining those who come in contact with Covid-infected people.

The directorate also suggested keeping all educational institutions shut and not holding any public examinations at this moment.

SHARP RISE IN INFECTIONS

A total of 3,567 cases were detected against 25,954 tests in 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday -- the highest since July 2 last year when 4,019 people tested positive for the virus.

Data shows the number of daily cases increased nearly sevenfold in three weeks from 515 cases recorded on March 2.

Last year, the same rise in infections took more than six weeks. The number of daily cases stood at 3,471 on June 12 compared to 497 on April 27 last year.

Yesterday's positivity rate of 12.97 percent is almost four times that of 3.36 percent recorded on March 2.

HOSPITALS OVERBURDENED

The DGHS data shows that Kurmitola General Hospital in the capital was overburdened by a huge number of patients for the last few days.

Yesterday, an additional 123 Covid patients were admitted to the hospital that can accommodate 275 patients. All 10 ICU beds were already occupied.

The situation was similar at nine other government hospitals in the city dedicated for Covid patients. Only seven of the 103 ICU beds at these hospitals were vacant.

"The most worrying thing is that the majority of patients are rapidly developing severe symptoms and they need high-flow oxygen support. We feel helpless when we need to provide patients with high-flow nasal cannula that is in short supply," Dr Farhana Wahab, consultant at Kuwait-Bangladesh Friendship Hospital, told this correspondent.

There was no high-flow nasal cannula at the general wards of the hospital, which was the first to start treating Covid patients in February last year.

During a visit to the Covid unit of Dhaka Medical College and Hospital yesterday, a mid-level staffer of the unit told this correspondent that the eight Covid wards at the hospital has one high-flow nasal cannula each.

Contacted, Prof Nazrul Islam, member of the National Technical Advisory Committee on Covid-19, said, "The government has failed in terms of management of the hospitals for Covid patients. Though it has a year's experience of dealing with the pandemic, we are still seeing an acute shortage of ICU beds, high-flow oxygen support and other equipment at the hospitals."

However, the health minister yesterday said, "We are increasing the number of hospital beds for Covid-19 patients. But if people do not wear masks and abide by the health safety guidelines, it will be tough to tackle the Covid situation in the coming days."

3 killed in Gaibandha

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that there could be more explosives. Bomb disposal unit of the DMP's Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTC) unit went to the spot.

On the possible involvement of militants, Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG) Devdas Bhattacharya of Rangpur Range told The Daily Star, "It is not possible to say now. We are checking the profiles of the deceased. The wife of the deceased has been detained for interrogation."

"We would be able to say clearly what actually happened later," he added.

Gaibandha Superintendent of Police Touhidul Islam said they had seen a black bag, which had some things that looked like stones and an extension cable.

"We have called in our explosive expert team. After they examine and investigate, it will be clearer," said the SP.

The SP said they have already detained five people, including Borhan's mother, wife, sister-in-law and Wahedul's wife and Habibur Rahman, who hails from Shibganj in Bogura.

Locals said Habibur and the unidentified deceased went to Borhan's home around 3:30pm on a motorcycle.

As Borhan's family members told them that Borhan was working on his paddy field, the duo asked Wahedul to go to the field and fetch him.

As they return, Borhan and Wahedul and the two others entered the room where there was no furniture and the floor was mostly covered with raw turmeric.

"Habibur hails from the Shibganj upazila of Bogura. We are suspecting that he is involved with this incident," SP Touhidul told The Daily Star.

The SP said they came to know that Borhan was a Kuwait expatriate and he returned from the Gulf country 10 years ago. Now he is engaged in farming, the SP added.

