

BANGLADESH UPDATE

3,737
New cases in 24hrs

5,88,132
Total cases

8,830
Deaths

5,31,951
Recoveries

2,770,866
Deaths

126,351,051
Total cases

Biden defends handling of migrant surge

AFP, Washington

US President Joe Biden pushed back Thursday against attacks on his handling of a surge of immigrants, calling it a seasonal increase and saying his approach was more humanitarian than predecessor Donald Trump's.

Accused by opposition Republicans of fomenting a new crisis of undocumented migrants, Biden said his administration is sending all but unaccompanied children and some families back into Mexico.

"There is a significant increase in the number of people coming to the border in the winter months of January, February, March. It happens every year," Biden said in his first press conference since taking office.

"The reason they are coming is that it is the time they can travel with the least likelihood of dying on the way, because of the heat in the desert," he said.

Biden said he had designated Vice President Kamala Harris to work with countries like Guatemala and Honduras on the root causes that drive migrants to head northward toward the United States.

"It's because of earthquakes, floods, it's because of the lack of food, it's because of gang violence," he said.

The immigration surge has become a key political challenge to Biden just weeks into his administration.

In February more than 100,000 migrants were interdicted at the border.

Of those, nearly all single adults were sent back into Mexico.

But an unknown number of families with small children, and more than 9,000 unaccompanied children, were permitted to stay.

New data from the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) suggest an acceleration in the first three weeks of March, with unaccompanied children appearing likely to top 14,000.

The jump has swamped CBP and Department of Housing and Human Services facilities meant to house and process the children, eventually to connect them with US relatives.

Some 16,500 children were in CBP and HHS custody this week.

Biden said there "is no easy answer" to the migration challenge.

But he said he could not let the children "starve to death and stay on the other side" of the border.

"No previous administration did that either, except Trump. I'm not going to do it," said Biden.

Biden said the jammed facilities for the children were "unacceptable" and that he was ordering an expansion, including opening a Texas military base near the border, Ft. Bliss, to house them.

He added that thousands of migrants who crossed into the United States as families with small children were being allowed to stay because Mexico is "refusing to take them back."

Axios reported that only 13 percent of some 13,000 who came as families in the third week of March were sent back.

But Biden said his government is negotiating to get Mexico to accept them.

"They should all be going back."

Republicans blasted back at Biden. Stephen Miller, the head of immigration policy in the Trump White House, said Biden's decision to accept all unaccompanied minors "single-handedly created this crisis."

"The youth migrant crisis will only end when Biden does a full 180 & switches from a resettlement policy to a repatriation policy," said Miller.

"The Trump policies created dramatic decreases in illegal immigration. The changes made by President Biden have created a virtual human tsunami," said senior Republican Senator Lindsey Graham.

17 killed

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"The fire appears to be caused by the impact. The fire started in the engine bay and then gas pipes leaked causing the massive flames," said Abdur Rashid, assistant director of Rajshahi Fire Service and Civil Defense.

He said they recovered at least 11 charred bodies, including two children and four women, from the vehicle.

Firefighters rescued eight people from near the charred vehicle, three of them were partially burned. Six of them, including two children and a woman, succumbed to their injuries at Rajshahi Medical College Hospital, he said.

Hearing the news, Sergeant Nur Mohammad of Bangladesh Army visited the scene. He said, the dead

include five of his family members: his sister Nazma Khatun, 28, Nazma's husband Ful Mia, 35, their son Faisal Ahmed, 13, and daughters Samiha, 8, and Sumaiya, 4.

There were 14 people in the HiAce, he said. The 13 people of four families boarded the microbus in Pirganj, Rangpur.

They were going to Rajshahi on vacation to visit the tourist destinations. They were supposed to have lunch at Nur Mohammad's house.

"I prepared their lunch. But none of them are alive now. I have seen the bodies. Police say there is nothing left to see," he told this correspondent.

Police said the others who died were passengers of the bus.

Hat-trick for Mamata

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Three lawmakers from TMC have already joined BJP recently, further consolidating its position in the eastern state.

Despite winning just three seats in the last election, the BJP now has 36 legislators in the assembly as 26 legislators from TMC, four from CPIM and three from Congress joined the ruling party.

TMC, the party that came to power first in 2011 by breaking the 34-year reign of the left-leaning Communist Party of India (Marxist) is also striving to retain power for a third consecutive term in the staggered polls.

On the other hand, the Left Front, comprising CPIM, Congress and the newly-formed Indian Secular Front, is yet to make any impact on the voters, show multiple polls surveys.

Of them, Congress ruled West Bengal for 30 years and CPIM for 34 years.

However, Abbas Siddiqui, a Furfura Sharifpizada, of Indian Secular Front, hogged the limelight after appearing in politics and analysts think Siddiqui can woo Muslim constituents, which is around 27 percent of the electorate in West Bengal and considered TMC supporters.

Both BJP and TMC sought to outdo each other in poll promises and campaign rhetoric and repeatedly claimed to win over 200 seats in 23 districts. And whichever party gets the magic figure -- 148 seats -- will form the government.

The first phase elections will be held for 30 constituencies that will cover five districts -- Paschim Midnapore, Purba Midnapore, Bankura, Jhargram, and Purulia. The final phase will take place on April 29 and the counting of votes will take place on May 2.

In those 30 constituencies in the last assembly polls in 2016, BJP got 8.6 percent of the votes while in the last Lok Sabha elections which consisted of these 30 seats, the party got 46.31 percent votes -- an increase of 38 percentage points.

However, recent surveys hinted at a

neck-to-neck battle between TMC and BJP with no party expected to reach the magic figure.

In the run-up to the elections, BJP has left no tactic unused in its arsenal, deploying heavyweight campaigners and popular actors, singers, and other artists.

Apart from PM Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Women and Child Development Minister Smriti Irani, Petroleum Minister Dharmendra Pradhan and movie stars Mithun Chakraborty, Srabanti Chatterjee and singer and central minister Babul Supriyo were on the high-decibel campaigns.

TMC also betted big on strong leaders like Mamata's nephew Abhishek Banerjee, who is considered to be her successor, TMC minister and famous actor Bratya Basu, and popular stars like Dev, Mimi Chakraborty, Nusrat Jahan, Saayoni Ghosh, Raj Chakraborty and Sayantika Banerjee.

Mamata Banerjee has led the Trinamool campaign, albeit in a wheelchair. She sustained injuries while on a visit to Nandigram, from where she is contesting the polls to take on her former ministerial colleague Suwendu Adhikari, who joined the BJP last December.

Adhikari, a long time minister from TMC and considered to be a key organiser of the party, turns out to be a major factor in the polls. His joining the BJP irked Mamata, forcing her to change her constituency -- from Bhabanipur to Nandigram -- to face Suwendu.

In the first phase, more than 73 lakh voters will decide the fate of a total of 191 candidates including 21 women candidates across 30 assembly segments.

The elections will be held amid tight security with the Election Commission deploying around 732 companies of Central Armed Police Forces that will guard 10,288 polling booths housed in 7,061 premises as most of the seats are in the once-Naxal-affected Jungle Mahal region.



President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stand in silence after placing wreaths at the National Memorial in Savar yesterday to pay homage to the martyrs of Liberation War.

PHOTO: PTD

Let's work together for us, entire South Asia

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from various parts of the world sent congratulatory messages.

Yesterday's programme began with the national anthem, followed by recitations from holy books, screening of documentaries on the progress of Bangladesh, defence forces, life and struggle of Bangabandhu, and performances by eminent singers.

Kamal Abdul Naser, chief coordinator of the National Implementation Committee of the event, gave the welcome speech.

Recorded video messages of world leaders, including UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin, were also screened.

Modi then handed over the Gandhi Peace Prize-2020 to Sheikh Rehana. The Indian government gave the award to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (posthumously) in recognition of his outstanding contribution to social, economic, and political transformation through non-violent and other Gandhian methods.

Modi, who was the guest of honor at yesterday's programme, thanked Bangladesh government for inviting him.

He said this was significant also because India and Bangladesh are celebrating 50 years of diplomatic relations. He paid tribute to Bangabandhu, who dedicated his whole life for Bangladesh and its people.

"For us Indians, it is a matter of pride, that we had the opportunity to honour respected Sheikh Mujibur with the Gandhi Peace Prize."

Modi remembered the hundreds of thousands of sons and daughters of Bangladesh who suffered countless atrocities, shed their blood, and put their lives at stake for their nation, their language, their culture.

He also remembered the brave soldiers of the Indian army who fought in the Liberation War.

"Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, General Aurora, General Jacob, Lance Naik Albert Ekka, Group Captain Chandan Singh, Captain Mohan Narayan Rao Samant, there are so many brave men such as these, whose stories of leadership and courage continue to inspire us even today."

He thanked Bangladesh for dedicating a war memorial to honour these brave martyrs in Ashuganj.

Modi said along with many of his

friends, he too took part in the Liberation War when he was 20-22 years old. He did satyagraha (a form of passive resistance).

Due to his support for the war, he said he had been arrested and had a taste of life in prison.

"That is to say, there was as much of a longing for Bangladesh's freedom in India as there was in Bangladesh. The images of the heinous crimes and atrocities committed by the Pakistani army deeply disturbed us and gave us countless sleepless nights."

Quoting Gobind Haldar, he said, "Those who gave Bangladesh its freedom by shedding oceans of blood, we will not forget them, we will not forget them."

"The world did not talk as much about the cruelty, oppression, and atrocities of Operation Searchlight as it should have, Modi said.

In the midst of all this, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a ray of hope for the people here and for the Indians. Bangabandhu's courage, his leadership, ensured that no power could keep Bangladesh suppressed.

Under his leadership, common people, the farmers, the youth, the teachers, the workers, came together to form Mukti Bahini. Therefore, Mujib Borsho is also a day to remember his vision, his ideals, and his courage, Modi said.

He said it was a happy coincidence that the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's liberation and the milestone of the 75th year of India's independence arrived together. For both the countries, the journey over the next 25 years would be very important.

Modi said Bangladesh and India have common heritage, common goals, possibilities and common challenges too but "we also face similar threats, such as terrorism".

"The ideologies and forces behind these inhuman acts are active even today. We not only need to be alert, but also need to stay united to fight them."

He said both the countries have demonstrated that with mutual trust and cooperation, solutions could be found for all issues, like the Land Boundary Agreement and cooperation during this pandemic.

"The future of India and Bangladesh is just waiting for countless such moments full of goodwill and mutual trust."

He stressed on better connections between the young men and women of the countries. Modi invited 50 young entrepreneurs to India to mark the

50th anniversary of India-Bangladesh relations and to connect with their startups and innovation ecosystems and meet venture capitalists for an exchange of learnings.

He also announced Subarno Jayanti scholarships for the young men and women of Bangladesh.

Modi said he was pleased that Bangladesh was showing its dynamism to the world under Prime Minister Hasina's leadership, proving wrong those who had objected to the creation of Bangladesh, looked down upon the people of Bangladesh as inferior, and those who had apprehended the existence of Bangladesh.

Hasina paid tribute to the three million martyrs, the women violated in 1971. She thanked Modi for gracing the occasion, honoring Bangabandhu by the Gandhi Peace Prize and arranging Babu-Bangabandhu Digital Museum, and the gifts of 109 ambulances and Covid-19 vaccines.

She said India always stands by Bangladesh, whatever political party is in power.

Recalling the horrors of 1975, when Bangabandhu and most of his family members were assassinated, Hasina said she and her sister Sheikh Rehana were then in Germany.

Subsequently, India had sheltered them until they returned to Bangladesh in 1981.

"The assassins wanted Bangladesh to be devoid of ideologies. No nation can achieve anything without an ideology," Hasina said.

The Awami League eventually gathered strength and assumed power after 21 years and honored 225 Indian leaders and citizens.

"Now, our relationship with India has reached a new height," she said, adding that cooperation on vaccine, trade, agriculture, connectivity has strengthened.

Hasina said Bangabandhu believed in regional cooperation and mutual trust. A strong South Asia is possible if India, the major regional power, comes forward. The region is the most densely populated in the world but also has immense potentials.

She said Bangladesh aspires to achieve the SDGs by 2030 and become a developed nation by 2041.

"At such a joyous moment, let us pledge to forget all the divisions, work for the development of people and establish a prosperous South Asia."

World leaders congratulate Bangladesh

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crisis and working towards the sustainable development goals," he noted.

Joe Biden sent a message, read out by US Ambassador to Bangladesh Earl R Miller, reflecting on how the strong partnership between the US and Bangladesh was formed based on their shared commitments to democracy and human rights.

"I look forward to working with you to strengthen these commitments to build an even brighter future for the people of our nations over the next 50 years and beyond," said Biden.

"Your hosting of one million Rohingya refugees is an example to the world of humanity and generosity. The United States will continue to be a steadfast partner in finding a durable solution to this crisis."

He also applauded Bangladesh's commitment on climate change and reiterated his administration's pledge to cooperate with Bangladesh on this issue.

Putin's message was read out by Alexander I Ignatov, Russia's ambassador to Bangladesh.

"I am confident that through our joint efforts we will ensure the further development of constructive bilateral cooperation in various fields for the benefit of our peoples in the interest of strengthening regional security and stability," he said.

In a pre-recorded video message, Boris Johnson recalled how instrumental Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's UK visit in 1972 was in forging the friendship between the two countries.

"The bond between us is incambrated by the 600,000-strong British-Bangladeshis who contribute so much to the United Kingdom every day. I think particularly of the fantastic doctors and nurses in our National Health Service, many of whom are helping to treat and vaccinate our people in our battle against Covid-19."

"Today, Bangladesh is one of the fastest growing economies in the world and we share the commitment to create an evermore prosperous and

environmentally sustainable future," added the United Kingdom PM.

In his message, he fondly remembered being welcomed to Bangladesh with a great deal of warmth and generosity in 2018 and said that he looked forward to working with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in the upcoming COP26 in Glasgow.

Imran Khan in his message said, "I extend a cordial invitation to Your Excellency to visit Pakistan at the earliest convenience. I am confident that this would open a new chapter in our fraternal relations," said Khan.

"We would like to fortify our existing bonds with brotherly Bangladesh and build new ones for our succeeding generations, as we believe the destinies of our two peoples are intertwined."

"On this occasion, let us renew our resolve to jointly work for a better future for our peoples and closer ties between our two countries," he mentioned.

In his message, Erdogan said, "The sentiments of brotherhood among our peoples, rooted in our common historical and cultural heritage, strengthen our mutual will to further develop our relations."

"Your esteemed father, late Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has taken his place among the prominent statesmen of the 20th century with the struggles he went through, and the sacrifices he made for his nation throughout his life," he mentioned.

Macron also sent a statement via the French Embassy in Dhaka, congratulating the Bangladeshi people and the nation.

"This important date in the history of a young and promising State was made possible thanks to the admirable courage of the Bengali people to defend their cultural heritage and freedom at the call of the Father of the Bangladesh Nation."

"In 1971, André Malraux called on the world to support the freedom of the Bengalis. Half a century later, Bangladesh can be proud of its achievements, and France remains ready to best meet its needs in the areas of the environment,

energy, telecommunications, the blue economy and sovereignty in matters of defence and security, in the spirit of an inclusive, open and secure Indo-Pacific space."

"The Bangladeshi government and people have shown their generosity by welcoming the Rohingyas forced to flee, once again, Myanmar in 2017. Your country has asserted itself as a responsible power: it is the main provider of troops for the peacekeeping operations in the world; it defends multilateralism and the norms of international law; it is committed to the defence of the environment and access to essential global public goods, such as health," he noted.

Earlier in the day, Prince Charles of Wales had also released a video message congratulating Bangladesh on the golden jubilee of its independence and commending the achievements in "bringing more than 50 million people out of extreme poverty since 1990; increasing life expectancy and reducing infant mortality; and turning the economy into one of the fastest-growing in the world."

The UK and Bangladesh "have a shared history, a shared constitutional commitment to freedom, the rule of law, free speech and democracy and an affection which continues to bind us in friendship."

The prince also commended Bangladesh's "considerable leadership on tackling the existential threats from accelerating climate change" and welcomed "the role of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in chairing the Climate Vulnerable Forum of nations most affected by the multiple threats of global warming, climate change, and biodiversity loss."

King of Sweden Carl XVI Gustaf also wrote to President Abdul Hamid, congratulating Bangladesh and wishing the best for the people of the country.

Others who extended felicitations include US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi and Japanese Ambassador to Bangladesh ITO Naoki.

Britain says HK 'has no right to dictate' passport recognition

AFP, Hong Kong

Britain told Hong Kong yesterday that it had "no right" to order other countries not to accept a UK travel document for a popular youth working scheme after the city confirmed it had made the request to several other nations.

The row is the latest diplomatic spat centering on the British National (Overseas) passport as China imposes a sweeping crackdown on dissent in Hong Kong.

The BNO passport is a legacy of Hong Kong's handover to China by colonial Britain in 1997.

Until recently it allowed Hong Kongers born before 1997 greater travel privileges to the UK but no working or settling rights.

But after Beijing imposed a sweeping national security law on the city last year, Britain began offering a pathway to citizenship for BNO passport holders and their families.

In response, Hong Kong and China said it would no longer recognise the BNO passport as a legitimate travel document.

Late Thursday, Hong Kong confirmed media reports that it had recently written to 14 consulates telling them not to allow young people to use their BNO passports to apply for working holiday visas in Europe, North America and parts of Asia.

Independence Day

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declared Bangladesh's independence following the crackdown on unarmed Bangalees on the midnight of March 25 by Pakistani occupation forces.

After a nine-month War of Liberation with the supreme sacrifices of three million people and the honour of 200,000 women, Bangladesh finally achieved its independence on December 16, 1971.

The day, which is a public holiday, began with a 50 gun-salute.

President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina issued separate messages extending greetings and warm felicitations to the people of the country at home and abroad.

The president in his message said, "On the eve of Mujib Barsho and the Golden Jubilee of our Independence, with the joint efforts of all, may our beloved motherland become a developed country free from hunger and poverty -- this is my expectation on the great Independence Day."

PM Hasina in her message said, "The independence earned through the supreme sacrifices of millions of people is the greatest achievement of Bangalee Nation. To ensure that the achievement remains meaningful, all have to know the true history of our great Liberation War and respect the spirit of independence. The spirit of the Liberation War has to be propagated from generations to generations."

Daily Covid-19

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Among the total infections, 90.45 percent patients recovered, while 1.50 percent so far died since the first Covid-19 positive cases were reported in the country on March 8 last year.

Among yesterday's 33 deaths, 21 are male and 12 female, the DGHS said, adding that four are in their 40s, 14 in their 50s while 15 are above 60 years.

According to the division-wise data, 26 people died in Dhaka Division.

Among the total 8,830 fatalities, 5,000 people died in Dhaka division, 1,615 in Chattogram division, 490 in Rajshahi division, 571 in Khulna division, 267 in Barishal division, 316 in Sylhet division, 371 in Rangpur division and 200 in Mymensingh division, according to the press release.

A total of 45,42,030 samples have so far been tested since the detection of the first Covid-19 cases in the country.