

BANGLADESH UPDATE

5,042 New cases in 24hrs

6,05,937 Total cases

45 Deaths

5,40,180 Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

2,810,063 Deaths

128,634,010 Total cases

# Temples, Hindu houses attacked in several dists

STAR REPORT

Multiple Hindu temples and homes have come under attack since Sunday in different districts.

In almost all the incidents, the perpetrators have remained unidentified.

The recent spate of violence against the Hindus started with Sunday's attack on a Brahmanbaria temple launched from a Hefajat-e-Islam procession.

Members of the minority religion were targets of violence after the Qawmi madrasa-based organisation unleashed havoc in many areas on Sunday during their dawn-to-dusk countrywide hartal.

Our correspondents from different districts reported the attacks on the minorities.

In Brahmanbaria on Sunday, around 200 Hefajat activists ransacked the district's biggest temple Sree Sree Anandamayee Kali Mandir around noon when Hindu devotees were observing the Dol Purnima festival there.

The attackers trashed and broke the idols of Krishna and Goddess Kali. The donation box for the temple and ornaments of idols were looted, while the artifacts used for ceremonies were ransacked and strewn about.

"We were performing prayers for Dol Purnima, when 200-300 armed men broke the temple gate and barged into our ceremony. We tried to protect the idol of Goddess Kali, but they shoved us aside and vandalised the idol," said Ashis Paul, president of Anandamayee Kalibari Temple Festival Celebration Committee.

The temple's priest Jibon Chakroborty said the attackers damaged everything and looted money and ornaments within 10 minutes.

In Magura, some unidentified attackers set fire to a cremation ground and its adjacent temple in Astogram area under Mohammadpur upazila on

Sunday night.

Three rooms of the cremation ground, known locally as Shita Pagoler Ashram, were burnt to ashes, said Swapna Rani Biswas, former vice chairman of Mohammadpur upazila parishad and organising secretary of the upazila unit of Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Unity Council.

Contacted, the district's Deputy Commissioner (DC) Ashraf Alam said the reasons could not be known immediately.

No one was arrested in this connection as police could not find any clue behind the incident, said Tarok Biswas, officer-in-charge (OC) of Mohammadpur Police Station.

In Bogura, attackers vandalised an idol of Hindu goddess Saraswati at a temple at Tengrakhal village in Dhunot upazila early yesterday.

"I went to the temple around 4:00am today [Tuesday] for performing a ritual. At that time, I found a fire at the temple's fence. Then, I rushed inside where I saw the Saraswati idol was beheaded," said Sumoti Rani, a priest of the temple.

Contacted, the district's Additional Superintendent of Police Gazir Rahman said, "We have already visited the spot. After talking to locals, we have kept some people under surveillance as we suspect they might be involved in the incident. The process of filing a case in this connection remains underway."

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Puja Ujjapan Parishad in a statement yesterday said a Hindu temple was vandalised at Bhabokhal village in Mymensingh's Sadar upazila and a Hindu home was set on fire at Monobhuyian Para of Chattogram's Mirsara upazila.

These attacks took place within the past two or three days, claimed the statement.

The parishad also demanded immediate identification of the attackers and their trial.

# A wake-up call for AL

FROM PAGE 1

Following on the big showdown in May 2013, the government developed a close relationship with HI high-ups especially with its late chief Shah Ahmad Shafi, who termed the PM "Qawmi Ma" (Mother of the Qawmi) at a rally on November 4, 2018, after her government recognised the highest degree given out by the Qawmi Madrasas as equivalent to post graduate degree.

The ostensible reason for the recognition was that the government could not leave out of the "mainstream" the thousands of students who pass out from the Qawmi system. The real reason was to gain political favour. This decision becomes highly questionable in the face of the facts that the government has no say over Qawmi madrasas' curriculum, teaching methods, subjects to be covered, qualification of the teachers, etc. Compared with the Alia-Madrasa system over which the government has full control, as it should, it has none over the Qawmi system. Yet the official recognition came. This was HI's most persistent demand and the most coveted victory. In return, it remained docile and silent as Sheikh Hasina ramrodded her brand of politics down the throat of the rest of the society.

Awami League and Sheikh Hasina thought that they had a winning formula of politics -- divide the Islamic forces, replace the traditional opposition with a domesticated one and suppress the independent media and rule happily. It did not work, as it never did in the past, anywhere in the world. For fundamentalist forces political alliances are always a matter of convenience and thus temporary, and never a matter of principle.

Whatever may have been its original aim HI has become today a political party for all practical purposes. According to a report by our senior correspondent Rashidul Hasan, published on 9th December 2020, "Hefajat-e-Islam is now more than a political party with the strategic disclaimer of having no political agenda." "About one-third of its leaders of the new committee who seized control came from political parties who are part of a 20-party alliance led by BNP."

HI was formed in 2010 comprising teachers of several Madrasas in Chattogram and it was triggered by the draft "Women Development Policy" of 2009 that advocated equal inheritance of property for men and women. However, the real emergence can be said to have occurred in 2013 after the "Shahbagh movement" of students demanding death penalty for all war criminals of 1971. The HI countered by holding a militant demonstration at Shapla Chattar (in front of Bangladesh Bank) placing a 13-point demand that included, among many others, the introduction of a Blasphemy Law, punishment of atheists, changes in school curriculum, etc. Who were its targets? Free thinkers, liberal forces and advocates of inclusive values and culture.

Following the frontal confrontation between law enforcement agencies and HI activists leading to several deaths, the government went for a serious behind-the-scene negotiations and with the acceptance of several of their 13-point demand, maintained a fragile peace between the two sides till the death of its leader Shah Ahmad Shafi that tilted the balance of power within HI towards the more anti-government faction of.

Sheikh Hasina's government is a victim of the classic notion of "Being too clever for its own good". The "know-all" and "have all the answers" attitude blinded them to the obvious faults and closed their minds to alternative suggestions. The fact that appeasement never works, especially against faith-based extremism, is a universally proven lesson that seem to have escaped this government.

On the other hand, for reasons that we know, AL went after BNP which, with all its faults, was not a faith-based organisation. In its determined effort to destroy BNP it destroyed a secular alternative in our political spectrum whose secular credentials, however, were considerably damaged by its alliance with Jamaat -- which officially still exists - and its ambiguous stance and ambivalent attitude towards the war crimes trial.

At the same time the ruling party went against the civil society, mocking them and denigrating them in various ways and even calling them "dustbins" who carry the sign "use me", meaning that they were such an unethical and unprincipled bunch as to be open for use by anybody willing to pay them for their services.

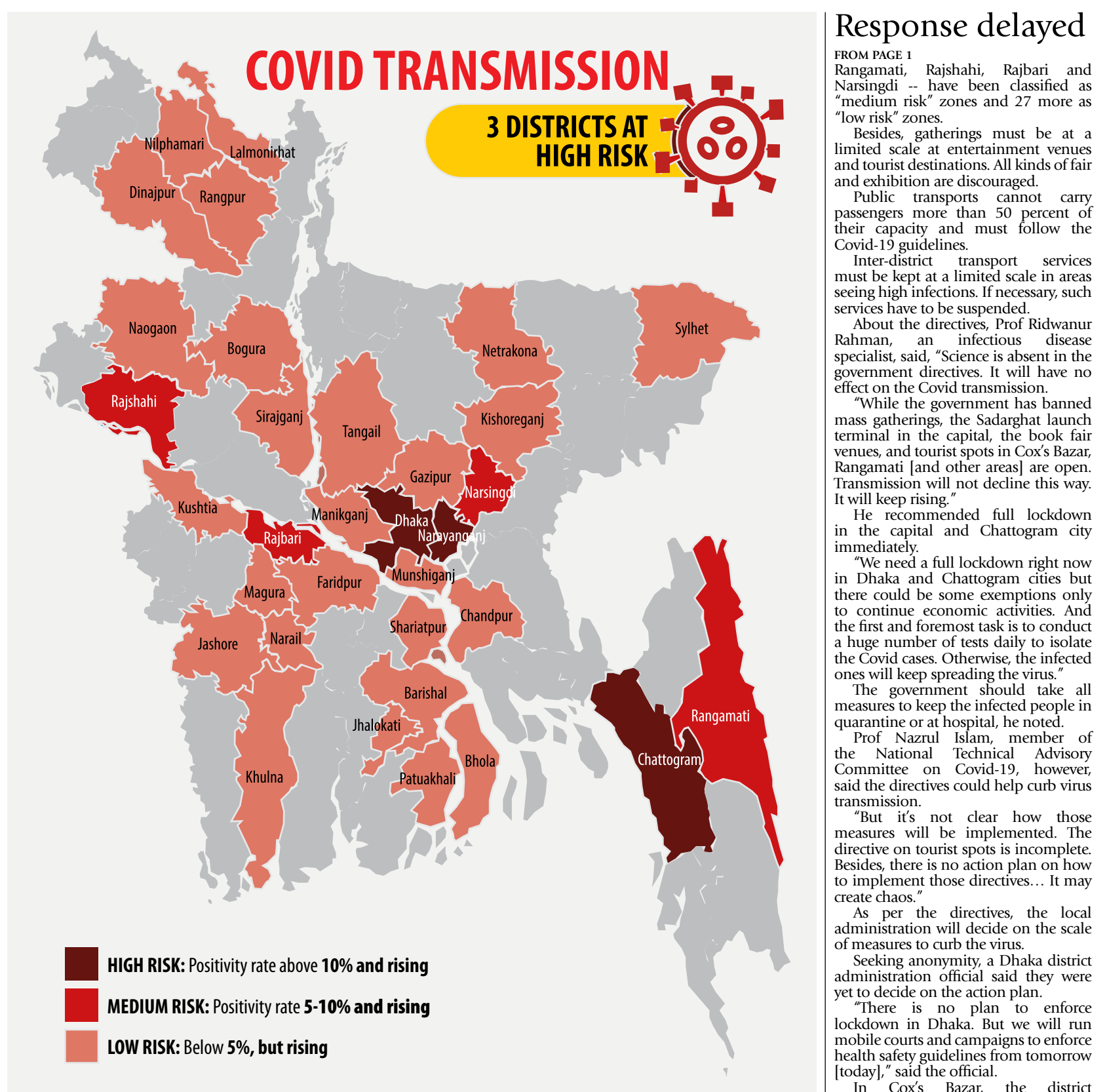
It was a similar story for the NGOs whose foreign funding was held up as their main identity and the fact of their several-decades-long contribution in the crucial social sectors -- like education, health, child mortality, etc -- being completely ignored. Their particular contribution in transforming lives at the grassroots level and also acting as a vital force for women empowerment and strengthening democratic and secular values were never given the credit that they deserved. Micro-credit which has been globally accepted as an effective method, albeit with some limitations, of poverty alleviation was literally mocked at as a method of entrapment of the poor into greater debt. Everything the NGO's achieved was questioned.

The independent media and voices of secular democratic dissent were shut with one singular step -- enactment of the DSA. Interestingly none of the hate-speech makers and the constant haranguing by the faith preachers of the supporters of the ideals of the Liberation War were ever brought under DSA. It was only as if to throttle the independent media and critics of the government that DSA was instituted and not for those whose politics, speeches, every utterance were directed at the fundamentals of our constitution.

All the above -- the civil society, the NGOs and the independent media -- were part of the secular and democratic forces that contributed to Bangladesh's globally praised journey towards advancement that we just celebrated with a 10-day gala function. It is these very forces that the government either ignored, denigrated or suppressed and who now, collectively, could have greatly strengthened the government's hands in its present and upcoming fight against forces whose ugly manifestations were just witnessed.

Just as the darkest spot lies where the light shines brightest, so also at the very moment of our most brilliant success we stand bared of a very serious vulnerability.

If there was ever a need for a wake-up call for the ruling party to re-examine its brand of politics, it is now. It must also serve as a wake-up call for us all.



# Hardly any Hefajat hand in mayhem!

FROM PAGE 1

That is why the case statements don't mention names of Hefajat members. Our investigation to identify those involved in the violence is still underway.

"We will identify and take action against them."

Hefajat had issued a six-point demand. One of them was that no police case would be filed against its supporters.

Shahriar Kabir, president of Ekattor Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Committee, views the development as a government strategy to pacify the Qawmi-madrasa-based group.

"The fact that there are hardly any cases against Hefajat is an effort by the government to calm the group. It is unfortunate that those in favour of the spirit of the Liberation War are now speaking in favour of Hefajat," he said.

"It seems that a competition to pacify fundamentalist forces is currently underway in the country. It is nothing but a suicidal move," he added.

Among the 25 cases, only one -- filed with the capital's Paltan Police Station -- accuses 32 Hefajat men, including top leaders of the organisation's Dhaka unit.

Even though Brahmanbaria suffered Hefajat mayhem for two days, including on Friday, police cases filed in connection with the incidents do not name a single Hefajat man as accused.

Over the course of the hartal on Sunday, four police outposts were attacked, eight major public establishments, including the municipality building, were incinerated, a Kali temple was vandalised while a prayer service was going on, "Bhasha Chatter" was torched, and legendary musical-maestro Allauddin Khan's music academy was decimated. In addition to that, seven private residences of AL men were destroyed.

A total of seven cases were filed with police in the district, but none mentioned any named accused.

Md Abdur Rahim, officer-in-charge of Brahmanbaria Sadar Model Police Station, said three cases were lodged with the police station against 6,500 unnamed accused for vandalising and carrying arson attack on the office of the district's superintendent of police and the town police range.

He said two more cases were filed against 500 unnamed people for vandalising the district's Ansar and VDP office.

Fourteen people were picked up from the spot on Friday, he added.

Javed Mahmud, OC of Ashuganj Police Station in the district, said two cases were filed for vandalising and carrying arson attack on a police

range and a toll plaza. Around 1,200 unnamed people were accused in the cases filed with the police station.

Clashes involving Hefajat left nine people, including a 14-year-old boy, dead in Brahmanbaria. But neither the police nor the family members of the victims filed any case over the deaths.

In Chattogram's Hathazari, where four people were killed after Hefajat men attacked a police station, not a single case was recorded until last night, said police sources.

In Habiganj, around 20 people, including seven policemen, were injured in clashes between law enforcers and Hefajat supporters in Jhingri area of Ajmeriganj on Ajmeriganj-Baniachang Road. The Hefajat men also set two police motorbikes on fire there.

Contacted, Md Nurul Islam, OC of Ajmeriganj Police Station, said a case was filed by the police and over 400 unnamed people were accused in it.

"Twenty-three people were named as accused. All the accused are basically picketers," he said.

Narayanganj too had turned into a battlefield on Sunday for a better part of the day when the Dhaka-Chittagong highway was barricaded by hartal supporters. At that time, journalists were hunted down and attacked, the road was littered with burning rubber tires, and Hefajat men locked in clashes with Border Guard Bangladesh members, leaving two men bullet-ridden.

A total of seven cases were filed across Narayanganj and 3,900 unnamed people and 166 named people were accused.

Not a single man linked with Hefajat was among those named in the cases.

Six of the cases were filed with Siddhirganj Police Station and the other with Ruppaganj Police Station.

The accused include the district BNP secretary, joint-coordinator, several Mohanagar Jubo Dal and Chhatra dal leaders, BNP leaders, a BNP councillor, a Jamaat leader and a Shibir leader.

Asked why names of Hefajat men were not accused in the case, Zayedul Alam, superintendent of police in Narayanganj, said "We have named those who we saw on the spot that day. We have specific information about who instigated the mayhem... we've collected evidence from photos and different video footage. No one was made accused because of their political affiliation."

"We have arrested four BNP men and are working to arrest the others," he said.

The SP claimed that those who hit the streets were not Hefajat men. "They had given us their word that

they would not cause mayhem on the streets and they kept their word."

In Dhaka, a total of eight cases were filed over the hartal by Hefajat and only the one with Paltan Police Station named top Hefajat leaders in Dhaka as accused.

Shah Iftekhar Ahmed, deputy commissioner of police (Wari Division), said, "Four cases were filed under our division over carrying out vandalism, sabotage, violence, obstructing police from carrying out duty and causing law and order to deteriorate. Those were filed with Jatrabari, Gendaria and Demra police stations."

"In Demra, six people were arrested from the spot and were named in the cases as accused. They are Hefajat supporters. In the other three cases, there is no named accused. We are investigating to find out who else was involved," said DC Ahmed.

Jatrabari Police Station OC Mazharul Islam said, "Two cases were filed -- one on Friday and the other one on Sunday -- with this police station. The charges include torching of vehicles, assault on police personnel, vandalism and sabotage. One of the cases was filed by the police, while in the other by a victim of the mayhem. One of the cases named 3,000-4,000 unnamed people as accused, while the other case does not have any specific number of accused."

Sources at Demra Police Station said 1,500 unnamed people were accused in one case and the six people were arrested from the spot.

The sources said the six, along with four held from Jatrabari the same day, were produced before court with remand pleas. The court, however, did not grant the remand prayers and sent all the 10 accused to jail.

Gendaria Police Station's OC Shaju Miah said, "On March 28, we filed a case accusing 600-700 unnamed people. We don't know who they are."

Syed Nurul Islam, deputy commissioner of police (Motijheel Division), said, "Two cases were filed with the Paltan Police Station. One was against many unnamed accused. Yesterday a case was filed where there are 32 named accused."

The case against the 32 was filed on March 29 and it is the only one where top Hefajat leaders in Dhaka, including General Secretary Mufit Munir Hossain, Maulana Kefayatullah, Maolana Jalaluddin Ahmed and others, were named as accused, according to the case documents.

Another case was filed with Hazaribagh Police Station following Hefajat's hartal. In that case, Nipun Roy Chowdhury, a member of BNP's central executive committee, was accused of instigating vandalism. She was arrested on March 28.

# Response delayed

FROM PAGE 1

Rangamati, Rajshahi, Rajbari and Narsingdi -- have been classified as "medium risk" zones and 27 more as "low risk" zones.

Besides, gatherings must be at a limited scale at entertainment venues and tourist destinations. All kinds of fair and exhibition are discouraged.

Public transports cannot carry passengers more than 50 percent of their capacity and must follow the Covid-19 guidelines.

Inter-district transport services must be kept at a limited scale in areas seeing high infections. If necessary, such services have to be suspended.

About the directives, Prof Ridwanur Rahman, an infectious disease specialist, said, "Science is absent in the government directives. It will have no effect on the Covid transmission."

"While the government has banned mass gatherings, the Sadarghat launch terminal in the capital, the book fair venues, and tourist spots in Cox's Bazar, Rangamati [and other areas] are open. Transmission will not decline this way. It will keep rising."

He recommended full lockdown in the capital and Chattogram city immediately.

"We need a full lockdown right now in Dhaka and Chattogram cities but there could be some exemptions only to continue economic activities. And the first and foremost task is to conduct a huge number of tests daily to isolate the Covid cases. Otherwise, the infected ones will keep spreading the virus."

The government should take all measures to keep the infected people in quarantine or at hospital, he noted.

Prof Nazrul Islam, member of the National Technical Advisory Committee on Covid-19, however, said the directives could help curb virus transmission.

"But it's not clear how those measures will be implemented. The directive on tourist spots is incomplete. Besides, there is no action plan on how to implement those directives... It may create chaos."

As per the directives, the local administration will decide on the scale of measures to curb the virus.

Seeking anonymity, a Dhaka district administration official said they were yet to decide on the action plan.

"There is no plan to enforce lockdown in Dhaka. But we will run mobile courts and campaigns to enforce health safety guidelines from tomorrow [today]," said the official.

In Cox's Bazar, the district administration has started conducting mobile courts as well as awareness campaigns.

"We already had meetings with different stakeholders, including hotel and transport owners... We asked them to suspend hotel booking online and reduce different amusement services at the sea beach. Our target is to discourage tourists from visiting Cox's Bazar," said Zahid Iqbal, additional deputy commissioner of Cox's Bazar.

About the fresh measures, Dr Mushtuq Hussain, consultant at the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research, said, "Though there is a need for lockdown, we will also have to consider the socio-economic reality."

"Current measures are target-based. If these do not work, we will suggest the government new measures. But hopefully this will help reduce transmission."

# Only 2 oxygen

FROM PAGE 1

vacant at the hospital, they referred all those patients to other public hospitals in the city.

Monir Hossain was one of them. A Titas Gas employee, Monir was carried to the hospital in an ambulance from Homna in Comilla.

"We have come all the way from Homna. But doctors here said they don't have vacant beds to admit my husband. They have referred us to Dhaka Medical College Hospital. But we are not sure if we can get a bed in DMCH," said Halima, Monir's wife.

"We requested the doctors to give him oxygen support till we find a suitable transport. But the doctors said that they won't be able to continue the support for long since they have already referred the patient to another hospital," said Halima.

Contacted last night, Halima said they eventually got a bed for her husband at Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital.

Jamaluddin was another patient who came to Mugda with severe respiratory problems. The 60-year-old was referred there after he was taken to Police Hospital in Rajbarah.

Jamaluddin's daughter Kohinoor was facing a different kind of problem. The driver of the ambulance on which the 60-year-old patient was brought to Mugda Medical College Hospital was in a hurry to leave.

"The driver is repeatedly saying that I will have to get my father out of the ambulance. But if we do that, he won't have oxygen support. We also could not admit him at Mugda hospital. It is really a scary situation for us," said Kohinoor, before leaving with her father on the same ambulance in the hope of better luck at Suhrawardy or DMCH.

"Recently we have been facing a rush in the emergency unit. It happens often and it is normal. This time, too, we are facing a rush as Covid-19 transmission is rising in the country," Dr Asim Kumar Nath, director of Mugda Medical College Hospital, told The Daily Star yesterday.

He added, "We have only two oxygen support devices in the emergency unit. With limited logistics, it is tough to give emergency support to the patients. The situation becomes tougher when the patients' rush increases."