

BANGLADESH
UPDATE



5,683
New cases in 24hrs



6,30,277
Total cases



9,213
Deaths



5,49,775
Recoveries

GLOBAL
UPDATE



2,854,408
Deaths



131,106,020
Total cases

Covid deaths increase 71pc in a week

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Compared to the previous week, deaths due to Covid-19 has increased by around 71 percent and transmission of novel coronavirus continued to surge.

To stop the upsurge, experts said there was no alternative to ensuring everyone wears a mask and maintains physical distancing.

At least 58 Covid-19 patients died yesterday, taking the death toll of the week to 344, up from the previous week's (March 21-27) of 201 patients.

The number of new cases has also risen by more than 66 percent during the same period, according to a Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) press release.

This week, a total of 38,471 patients were detected while, in the previous week the detection was 23,100.

In the past 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday, a total of 5,683 people tested positive after testing 24,548 samples.

The positivity rate was 23.15 percent.

The positivity rate is an important parameter to measure the level of virus transmission.

According to the World Health Organization, the transmission will

be considered under control if the positivity rate remain stagnant below five percent continuously for at least two weeks.

After the second spike in November and December last year, the positivity rate started to going down from January. Throughout February, this rate was below three percent, but started rising in early March.

For nearly one month, the hospitals, especially in Dhaka city, have been struggling with the rising number of critical patients.

As of noon yesterday, only three ICU beds out of 118 in Dhaka's Covid dedicated public hospitals were vacant.

Only 105 general beds in those hospitals out of 2,511 were vacant.

With the latest counts, the total number of deaths due to Covid-19 rose to 9,213 while the number of confirmed cases to 6,30,277.

In the 24 hours, 2,364 patients recovered from their illnesses, raising the number to 5,49,775, which is more than 87 percent of all cases detected so far.

On March 8 last year, the DGHS reported the first three cases while the first death was reported on March 18.

Of the yesterday's deceased, 38 were males and 20 were females.



Three wheelers running on the eastern channel of the might Jamuna river at Char Gopal in Tangail. The channel has completely dried up allowing people to use vehicles to go from one place to the other instead of using boats.

PHOTO:
MIRZA SHAKIL

France urges Iran to be 'constructive' at nuclear talks

AFP, PARIS

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian yesterday called on Tehran to be "constructive" during talks with world powers next week in Vienna.

The European Union is pushing to bring US President Joe Biden's administration back into the nuclear accord to limit Tehran's ambitions.

The United States will not take part directly in the discussions also involving China, Germany, Russia, and Britain.

But for the first time since former leader Donald Trump pulled out of the Iran agreement in 2018, a US delegation will be present.

The 2015 nuclear accord saw Iran granted relief from international sanctions in exchange for accepting limits on its programme aimed at easing fears it could acquire atomic weapons.

Biden has promised to rejoin the agreement on condition Iran first returns to respecting commitments it abandoned in retaliation for Trump pulling out and reimposing swingeing

sanctions.

Le Drian spoke to Iranian counterpart Javad Zarif on Saturday and "welcomed the coming resumption in Vienna of discussions on the nuclear dossier".

He also "encouraged Iran to be constructive in the discussions ... to identify in the coming weeks what needs to be done for a full return to respecting the agreement," Le Drian said in a statement.

"France will take part in a pragmatic and at the same time demanding way.

"I called on Iran to refrain from any further violation of its current commitments in the nuclear field likely to damage the dynamics of a resumption of discussions," he added.

Tehran says Washington has to end sanctions before it will make any moves to get back in line and has refused to hold direct negotiations with the US.

US State Department spokesman Ned Price called the Vienna talks a "healthy step forward" and Washington "remains open" to a direct encounter with Tehran.

BFIU seeks bank

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Account information of some 11 people, who are holding top administrative positions in 11 madrasas located in Narayanganj and Brahmanbaria districts, has to be sent to the BFIU.

In addition, the BFIU has also asked banks to send account details of 30 madrasas, including Al-Jamiatul Ahlia Darul Ulum Moinul Islam, popularly known as Hathazari Madrasa located in Chattogram.

Some other madrasas, located in Hathazari, Patiya and Fatikchhari, have also been mentioned in the BFIU letter.

It also asked for the bank details of 11 madrasas in Narayanganj, in its bid to see whether these institutions have any involvement in money laundering and terrorist financing.

Contacted, Abu Hena Mohd Razee Hassan, head of the BFIU, refused

to make comments in this regard as an intelligence agency cannot reveal any information on any issue being investigated.

Hefajat men started the mayhem on March 26.

For three days straight, they ran amok vandalising and torching establishments and properties in Dhaka, Brahmanbaria, Chattogram and other districts.

Clashes involving Hefajat left nine people, including a 14-year-old boy, dead in Brahmanbaria while four people were killed after the Islamist group attacked a police station in Chattogram's Hathazari.

At least 43 cases have been filed so far in connection with the violence carried out by Hefajat activists in Dhaka, Chattogram, Brahmanbaria, Kishoreganj and Narayanganj.

Over 20,000 people were made accused in the cases.

The poor brace

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employers told me to come only two days a week from now on. I am afraid I will get fired soon," said Rubina. She has her orphaned nephew and niece depending on her.

"We need relief. There is no other way we can survive," she said.

An economic think tank called South Asian Network for Economic Modelling found that once the coronavirus-driven social restrictions ended last year in December, the poverty rate stood at 42 percent, up from 21.6 percent in 2018.

Abdur Rahman 41, a hawker selling baby clothes at Mirpur 10 intersection had loaned Tk 1 lakh to invest in clothes keeping Pahela Baishakh and Eid in mind.

"We mostly see sales happening during Pahela Baisakh, the two Eids and winter," said Rahman. "If I cannot sell anything during Pahela Baishakh, I will be in deep financial trouble."

He said that the government needs to give relief and it has to enough to last the lockdown.

"Last year, we got 20 kilogrammes

of grains, which was supposed to last for as many as 6 months. It only lasted a month," he said.

During the pandemic, only 35 lakh poor were given a one-time cash incentive of Tk 2500, leaving millions other out of the purview of financial assistance, while relief distribution nationally was mired in well-documented corruption.

Maulana Abdus Sobhan, development committee president of Korail Slum Boubazar unit, said, "Last year, the kind of blow that the slum saw, left lakhs hungry. If this year is going to be a repetition, these people need relief materials. Relief can at least help them stave off the lenders."

Monu Miah is a footpath hawker at Bhashantek slum. "Last year during the lockdown, I had to Tk 40,000 in loans. I am not even being able to return the money I borrowed and there are eight lenders after me for the money. I was barely getting back on my feet and you are telling me that this year might be the same?"

[Zyma Islam contributed to the report]

'Lockdown' looms

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reporters. Industries will remain open and employees will work in shifts, following the health guidelines, he added.

The move comes as the Covid-19 positivity rate reached 23.15 percent yesterday. The average positivity rate was below 3 percent in February.

Besides, the National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) on Covid-19 last week recommended "partial or modified" lockdown on "high-risk" areas. The government issued an 18-point directive, including restrictions on offices and public transport.

Covid-19 cases began to rise again from March 9.

The highest 31.91 percent positivity rate was seen on August 3 last year. The number of daily cases remained high between May and August last year, and stayed low in September and October.

There was a little spike in November and the first half of December. Confirmed cases fell below 1,000 on December 26 and the trend continued until the first week of March.

The government shut down public and private offices and suspended public transport operations from March 26-May 30 last year. The authorities later imposed restrictions on specific areas with high infection rates.

But the shutdown could not be properly implemented, especially during the Eid festivals when tens of thousands people left Dhaka for their villages homes. Besides, the garments

factories were allowed to operate.

Labourers and low-income people were forced to leave home to earn a living.

After the ministers' announcements yesterday, people rushed to the bus and launch terminals in the capital to leave for their hometown. Many people said the one-week restriction would be extended later.

People also rushed to kitchen markets and grocery stores to stock up on the essentials.

Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan yesterday said train services will be suspended "once the lockdown is imposed". However, there will be no restrictions on freight trains.

The authorities have cancelled exams and shut down tourist destinations like Cox's Bazar and the Sundarbans.

Besides, Boisabi Utsab, the biggest traditional festival of the indigenous communities of the hill tracts, has been cancelled, reports UNB.

POSSIBLE STEPS

Sources said the Cabinet Division sent a proposal to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina recommending a ban or limit on public movement and other activities.

It said the law enforcers would strictly enforce travel restrictions between districts while the general public would not be allowed outdoors between 8:00pm and 6:00am, unless there is an emergency.

Public and private offices would remain open on a limited scale, but the employees would not be allowed to leave the city of their work. Rally, mass

gathering, and social programmes should be banned.

Only five people would be allowed inside a mosque at a time. For Juma prayers, no more than 10 people would be allowed.

Markets of daily necessities would be moved to open spaces.

Fertiliser, insecticide, food, essential goods, medical equipment, daily essentials, kitchen markets, restaurants, drug stores, hospitals and the media would also remain out of the purview of the shutdown.

Prof Ridwanur Rahman, an infectious diseases specialist, said, "As a physician, I would say we need a complete shutdown for two weeks as hospitals are at capacity.

This [complete shutdown] is scientific and the best approach now. But considering livelihood, the new measure is not bad. It will partially contribute to slowing down the transmission."

He told The Daily Star yesterday that the success would depend on how effectively the measures are implemented. "In the past, we have seen such measures exist only on papers."

Prof Nazrul Islam, member of the National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) on Covid-19, said, "I do not see any scientific basis in the government decision. Be it lockdown or movement restriction, it must be for 15 days, considering the incubation period of the virus. Otherwise, those infected will spread infection after seven days."

Blame game at full throttle

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mayhem, claimed the Hefajat started the violence and it was mainly responsible for the sabotage. But a rebel AL group, the local BNP and its affiliated bodies, and Jamaat-Shibir also took part in the violence to meet their interest.

Speaking to The Daily Star yesterday on condition of anonymity, a high official of the intelligence agency said Hefajat is mainly responsible for the violence in Brahmanbaria.

"On March 26, leaders and activists of Hefajat carried out the

violence protesting the Dhaka incident [police action on a Hefajat demonstration]."

On the second and third day [March 27, 28], Hefajat was accompanied by Awami League rebels, BNP and Jamaat, the official added.

Four UN troops die in major attack in northern Mali

AFP, Bamako

Four United Nations peacekeepers were killed Friday when suspected jihadists staged a major attack on their camp in Aguelhok, northern Mali, the UN mission said.

The peacekeepers "bravely pushed back a complex attack carried out by several heavily armed terrorists," MINUSMA said, adding the attackers had suffered heavy losses and had abandoned "several of their dead".

In a statement, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said he "condemns in the strongest terms" the assault, commending the bravery of those who repelled the attack.

The incident left 19 wounded, the statement said, in addition to the four troops who were killed.

A source in MINUSMA said the attack occurred around 200 kilometres (120 miles) from the Algerian border, targeting a contingent of peacekeepers from Chad.

A UN source described the dawn raid as of "very large magnitude" by about 100 attackers on motorbikes and in vehicles.

"The fighting lasted three hours... mortar shells, shooting exchanges... attempted suicide car bombing," the source said.

He added that about 20 assailants had been killed.

A Chadian military source said "two of our forces' positions were attacked. We lost four people, including our forces' detachment commander, and 16 were injured."

The UN force's statement called the attack another "attempt against the peace process" that will "in no

way undermine its determination to continue the execution of its mandate".

It thanked "international forces for their aerial support".

The attack took to 10 the number of MINUSMA troops killed this year.

Also on Friday morning, two Malian soldiers were killed and around 10 wounded in an attack blamed on jihadists in Diafarabe in the country's centre, Mali's army said in a statement.

Local resident Youssouf Aya told AFP that he had seen a line of armed men on motorcycles headed toward a military post, then heard gunfire.

He said the assailants had "briefly occupied" the military post before leaving along the Niger River.

Mali has been struggling to contain an Islamist insurgency that first broke out in the north in 2012 before spreading to the centre and neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger.

Thousands have died and hundreds of thousands have fled their homes.

France, the former colonial power, intervened in Mali in 2013 to beat back the jihadists and now has some 5,100 soldiers deployed across the semi-arid Sahel region, though the mission has not been without controversy.

A UN probe published Tuesday concluded that a French air strike in central Mali killed 19 civilians on January 3.

The French defence ministry has denied the account, insisting it had identified and attacked an "armed terrorist group".

On Friday, France's military issued a statement on a separate incident,

saying a woman died and a child was slightly wounded in a fire linked to an operation in Mali.

It said a suspected jihadist was also killed and two others captured in the operation overnight Wednesday to Thursday in an area southeast of Tessalit in the country's north.

According to the statement, the soldiers were shot at by the suspected jihadist in a tent and returned fire.

The tent caught fire with the woman and child inside, it said. The child was evacuated to a military hospital.

Hong Kong to vet political candidates' past to ensure loyalty to China: official

AFP, HONG KONG

Candidates for public office in Hong Kong will have their entire history vetted, its top justice official said yesterday, after China announced a radical overhaul to ensure only "patriots" run the city.

Beijing imposed sweeping changes on Hong Kong's electoral system on Tuesday, the latest step in an ongoing crackdown on the city's democracy movement after massive and often violent protests.

The latest amendments to the Basic Law, Hong Kong's mini constitution, have ensured that a majority of lawmakers will be selected by a reliably pro-Beijing committee, and every candidate will be vetted by national security officers.

At least five killed in Bangkok residence collapse

AFP, Bangkok

A Bangkok residence building collapsed yesterday, killing at least four rescue workers and a resident, according to an emergency worker.

The three-story house, located in a luxury gated community in western Bangkok, was engulfed in flames around 6 am and the fire raged for about an hour before it was put out.

At around 7 am, as firefighters and rescue workers were moving through the razed structure in the Thai capital, it abruptly collapsed, killing at least five, including a resident.

"The cause of the collapse remains unknown. The fire could be the main reason for interiors of the residence building to collapse," Jirathikorn Banjongkit, chief of rescue at the Poh Teck Tung Foundation, told AFP.

By 4 pm, he said that rescue workers and firefighters were still working to free four of the bodies -- only one had been retrieved from under the rubble of concrete and wiring structure.

AFP-verified footage showed firefighters standing by the building and hosing down its charred exterior, with at least one person on the second floor, when the building abruptly crumbled.

Bangkok governor Aswin Kwanmuang told reporters that there was "no safe passage" to easily retrieve the bodies and see if more had been trapped.

People rush

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announcement of the lockdown.

Mohammad Sabuj, a potato seller, said that his stock of the key food item was supposed to last three days but had been exhausted in just an hour and half.

"I have sold 250 sacks of potato in just an hour and half. I have never sold such a huge amount in such a small time ever before," said Sabuj, who has been involved in this business for 40 years.

He said that his average daily sale was around 60-80 sacks (each containing 50-60 kg of potatoes).

Due to the buying spree, the price of potatoes and onions also saw a rise in wholesale markets. Potatoes, sold at Tk 13 per kg in the morning, had risen to Tk 18, while the local variety of onions, sold at taka Tk 28-30 in the morning, shot up to Tk 35-38 by the afternoon.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Amena Khatun, who lives in Moghbazar, said that she turned up in the kitchen market hearing the news of lockdown.

"I was supposed to come on Monday for the monthly purchase of essentials. But I changed my mind after hearing the news of lockdown," she said.

Mizanur Rahman, a resident of Kathalbagana area, echoed Amena.

Some super shops in Dhaka also witnessed an influx of customers.

Shaheen Khan, chief executive officer of Meena Bazar (a concern of Gemcon Group), said after the announcement of the lockdown, the flow of shoppers increased since noon, which went on till evening.

"But I wouldn't call it a panic buy. However, after the announcement [of lockdown], the number of customers increased a little. About 25 per cent more customers were seen today," he added.

Meanwhile, many people also thronged the inter-district bus terminals and Sadarghat launch terminal in the city after the lockdown was announced.

Abul Kalam, president of bus owners' association of Mohakhali bus terminal, said the number of passengers increased a little in the afternoon.

"We think the pressure of passengers would increase tomorrow [Sunday]," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

Mosharref Hossain, general manager of Hanif Paribahan, said a huge number of passengers started gathering at Gabtoli since yesterday noon.

"We were asked to keep 50 percent of the seats vacant but we are facing a tough challenge to maintain health safety guidelines due to the huge pressure of the passengers," he said.

Zainal Abedin, joint director (Dhaka river port) of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority, told this correspondent at 4:49pm that although they are yet to see a rise in passengers, it may change later in the day.

Shahidul Alam, sub inspector of River Police at Sadarghat outpost, said the number of passengers had increased in the evening.

At Kamalapur, there were also reports of increased passengers.

However, Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan said they will shut down passenger trains and operate freight trains once the lockdown is imposed.

"Rail is a public transport run by the government. So, we will take steps as per the government's decision," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

"However, everything would be cleared after the circular [of lockdown] is issued," he added.