

BANGLADESH UPDATE



7,087
New cases in 24hrs



6,37,364
Total cases



9,266
Deaths



5,52,482
Recoveries



2,863,564
Deaths



131,815,531
Total cases

Prices of essentials rise ahead of Covid restrictions

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The prices of some essential commodities went up in the capital's wholesale and retail markets yesterday, a day before the start of the government-imposed week-long restrictions.

The prices of onion, garlic, potato and ginger rose by Tk 5-20 per kg at retail and wholesale markets.

The price of onion increased by Tk 5 per kg to Tk 35 at wholesale markets while it rose to Tk 40 at retail markets.

The price of ginger hiked by Tk 20 per kg to Tk 85 at wholesale markets, and rose to Tk 100 per kg at retail markets yesterday.

Garlics reached a price of Tk 110 per kg -- a hike of Tk 8 -- while potato prices increased Tk 3 per kg to Tk 20 at wholesale markets on the same day.

Besides, prices of other daily essentials including rice, oil, lentils rose by different margins over the last few days, in the lead-up to the month of Ramadan.

Since the seven-day restrictions were announced on Saturday, shoppers have been thronging grocery stores, super shops and kitchen markets in Dhaka.

Although kitchen markets will be open while maintaining government directives and health guidelines during the restriction period, shoppers were seen buying more essential commodities than needed.

This correspondent visited multiple kitchen and wholesale markets including Karwan Bazar and Mohammadpur Krishi Market and found a similar scenario.

Ahasan Habib, a shopper, said he was buying extra amounts out of fear of further price hikes; not of possible food shortages during the restrictions.

"The prices of daily necessities have continuously been rising over the last several days. If this continues, low-income people like us will have no choice," he said.

Golam Rahman, president of Consumers Association of Bangladesh, said with Ramadan looming and the seven-day restrictions, some wealthy people are buying more than necessary.

"So, buying extra items creates additional demand and taking advantage of that, traders increase prices. That's probably a big reason behind the price hikes," he said.

He said, "So if we are all restrained in purchasing, then the market will be stable."

8 crushed

FROM PAGE 1
in her home when a tree fell on the house around 3:30pm. She died on the spot.

Another man was seriously injured and taken to Rangpur Medical College Hospital for treatment. His identity could not be identified immediately, the OC added.

DC Matin said, "We have given Tk 10,000 to each of the deceased's family." Idrish Ali, district relief and rehabilitation officer, said many huts and crop fields were damaged. They were calculating the total damage.

Meanwhile, hundreds of houses, trees and crop fields were damaged in Rajshahi.

At least 30 poles of streetlights were uprooted in Rajshahi city. They had been installed only a month and a half ago, said RCC officials.

The Met office recorded winds speeds up to 65kmph in Rajshahi.

In another development, the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) suspended the operations of all ferry services in the evening due to storms.

Second wave

FROM PAGE 1
showed a sudden surge from March 29 to 31, and since then, it has been rising." Hasina said in her winding up speech in the 12th session of 11th parliament which was prorogued yesterday.

About the new restrictions, the PM said, "I know everyone will face difficulties. Despite this, I say people's lives should be given preference over everything."

The situation will be under control if people follow the rules and health guidelines.

The PM further said tourism and domestic flight operations will remain suspended for a week while shopping malls will be closed.

The PM advised everyone to inhale hot water vapor at home. "It is not clear how bad the virus is this time. The situation got worse all of a sudden."

She urged people to wear facemasks, maintain social distancing, and stop social gatherings including wedding ceremonies.

She asked the authorities to make sure people arriving from abroad are quarantined.

"Take special care of children and the youth as Covid-19 infection rate is much higher among them, although the elderly people were infected with the virus during the first wave."

Mentioning that several lawmakers died of coronavirus, she mourned the deaths of the people from Covid-19.

She said development projects would continue.

The government has been working to make Bangladesh self-reliant in every sector. She hailed the development of a new variety of onion.

Hasina urged people to farm on every inch of land to prevent food shortage due to the pandemic.



There was a massive rush in the capital yesterday, on the eve of the government's 7-day restrictions to curb the recent spike in coronavirus cases. With public transport set to be suspended from today, clockwise from bottom left, hundreds of city dwellers rushed to Gabtoli Bus Terminal to go back to their home districts; others crowded at the Sadarghat Launch Terminal. There was near gridlock in Banani as people scammed in their vehicles to get their errands done and a similar scenario played out in Karwan Bazar kitchen market. A common theme in all the photos taken yesterday is that health guidelines -- social distancing and wearing masks -- were flouted.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN/RASHED SHUMON/SK ENAMUL HAQ

Govt working to tap other sources

FROM PAGE 1
at the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, told The Daily Star yesterday.

The government has signed an agreement of purchasing three crore doses of vaccines from Serum Institute of India through its local agent Beximco.

As per the agreement, the government was supposed to get 50 lakh doses of vaccines each month.

But till yesterday, the government has only received 70 lakh doses of vaccines in two instalments.

In the meantime, New Delhi reportedly imposed a temporary restriction on all major exports of the AstraZeneca vaccine made by SII

to meet demands at home, reported global media.

Apart from these, on January 21 Bangladesh received 20 lakh doses as a token of friendship from India while Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi brought 12 lakh doses with him when he came to join the country's golden jubilee celebration.

However, the third shipment of the doses purchased by Bangladesh from SII is still uncertain.

Contacted, Nazmul Hassan Papon, managing director of Beximco Pharmaceuticals Ltd, said, "We are yet to get any date of the vaccine shipment's arrival. We are expecting that by next week we will be able to get

details of the next consignment."

Besides, the Covax programme, led by the World Health Organisation and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, has committed to give Bangladesh a total of 6.8 crore vaccine shots. As part of the commitment, the country is expected to receive 10,908,000 shots of the Oxford vaccine by May.

Asked about the current status, the health minister said they were yet to get any update from Covax.

With the vaccine stock depleting and uncertainty looming over getting the purchased vaccine from SII as scheduled, the on-going vaccination campaign appears set to suffer.

But the government has decided

to continue the mass inoculation campaign as planned.

"We had a meeting to discuss the inoculation programme and have decided to continue the way it is across the country. There is no change in the plan. We will keep on administering the first dose," Prof Dr Meerjady Sabrina Flora, additional director general of Directorate General of Health Services, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Meanwhile, health officials said injecting the second dose of the vaccination will start from April 8.

The government has so far inoculated 54,98,172 people, while 69,15,222 people have gotten registered with Surokha app for vaccination.

Another new record in daily Covid cases

FROM PAGE 1
operational from 8:00am to 4:00pm.

The government has, however, kept the ongoing Amar Ekushey Book Fair open.

Although experts said there was a need for complete shutdown, they said the current measures will still help reduce transmission, but it will depend on successful enforcement.

"These are very good measures and will reduce the deaths, I think. But it will depend on how successfully those are enforced," Prof Ridwanur Rahman, an infectious disease specialist, told The Daily Star yesterday.

About the book fair, he, however, said, "This is a bad example. It will create dissatisfaction among other businesses. Nothing should be more important than lives."

Speaking to The Daily Star yesterday, Prof Nazrul Islam, member of the Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) on the Covid-19 pandemic, said, "Already a good number of people has left Dhaka before the new directives come into effect from tomorrow [today]. So, there is a chance of the virus spreading in the periphery spreading the virus to the periphery. The directives, otherwise, are good."

He said, "Now it is important to increase daily tests and ensure proper enforcement [of the directives]."

Yesterday the positivity rate, which is an important parameter to measure the level of virus transmission, was 23.07 percent against a total of 30,724 tests conducted yesterday.

According to the World Health

Organization, the transmission will be considered under control if the positivity rate remains stagnant below five percent continuously for at least two weeks.

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

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

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

Only 113 out of 2,515 general beds in those hospitals were vacant.

Dr Sarwar Ul Alam, director of Kuwait-Bangladesh Friendship Hospital, the country's first Covid dedicated hospital, told The Daily Star yesterday, "The surge in number of patients is on the rise again. We have 15 ICU beds, but the number of those in need of the ICU is very high."

With the latest count, the total number of confirmed cases is now 6,37,364.

In the last 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday, 2,364 patients recovered, raising the number of recoveries 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 those who died yesterday, 38 were males and 20 females.

Surveillance data key to fighting Covid

FROM PAGE 1
of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA).

The group's primary role will be to advise and support efforts to assist WHO and UN member states to obtain accurate estimates of the number of deaths attributable to the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic.

Nazrul Islam is the only Bangladeshi among the 31 members of the advisory group.

In line with the broader objective of the group, Nazrul and two other members from the advisory group have been analysing all reported deaths since 2016 from 29 countries across the globe.

"We have selected those countries because they have accurate and robust data on vital statistics. Using a newly developed model, we will analyse the trends and patterns of deaths over the past few years, and will compare with the deaths during the Covid-19 pandemic," he said.

In this way, the team aims to assess the deaths that were, directly or indirectly, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

He informed The Daily Star that Bangladesh was not among the 29 countries under their study.

"Our statistical model requires detailed weekly mortality data by age and sex. For an accurate examination of the historical trend of mortality, we also need detailed data for the last few years. To my knowledge, such data is not yet available from Bangladesh," Nazrul said.

According to Nazrul, more detailed data is also required to have a proper understanding of viral transmission.

"For example, test positivity rate could be very misleading in measuring the level of transmission. It depends on how accurate the diagnostic test is. But more importantly, it depends on the population who are being tested for Covid-19. If we test 1,000 frontline workers, we may see a higher test positivity rate compared to the positivity rate of another 1,000 people who are safely working from home," he said.

Lauding the countrywide vaccination programme in Bangladesh, he also warned that the vaccine alone will not

be enough to control the pandemic.

"I am not yet eligible for a Covid-19 vaccine here in the UK. Bangladesh has done an extraordinary job in the Covid-19 vaccine rollout. However, since the Covid-19 vaccine does not offer immediate protection against the disease, we need to continue to adhere to other protective measures such as personal hygiene, wearing masks properly, and maintaining physical distancing."

He, however, stressed on kindness and compassion for everyone at this critical time.

"I am inside my house for the last one year -- maintaining physical distancing and other health safety guidelines. I understand it can be challenging for many. But this is for the greater good of everyone. It is our shared responsibility to keep each other safe," Nazrul Islam concluded.

In the context of the recent surge of Covid-19 in Bangladesh, he said, there are many things to do in terms of a public health campaign.

"Several issues are very important simultaneously -- ensure vaccine

rollout, reaching out to the people to be serious about Covid-19, and proper surveillance. If you ask me, I would invest more in a public health campaign and surveillance," Nazrul Islam said.

Nazrul received his Master's and PhD degrees in epidemiology and biostatistics at Harvard University and the University of British Columbia respectively following his medical training as a general practitioner.

He then moved to the University of Cambridge as a quantitative research associate to work on randomised clinical trials and large observational studies on cardio-metabolic disorders.

Much of his recent research has been dedicated to a better understanding of Covid-19.

His current work at the University of Oxford involves a combination of research methodology, medical statistics, and machine learning to examine cardiovascular disease burden using integrated electronic health records and large prospective health studies.

He is also a research editor at the British Medical Journal.

MBBS admission test results released

STAR REPORT

The Directorate General of Medical Education (DGME) yesterday published the results of the MBBS admission test for the academic session 2020-21.

A total of 48,975 students passed against 12,690 seats in 47 public and 70 private medical colleges across the country for the academic year 2020-21.

There are 4,350 seats in public medical colleges while 8,340 in private medical colleges.

Ali Nur, secretary of the Health Education Department under the health ministry, announced the result around 7:00pm from the health directorate.

On April 2, a total of 116,792 aspirants appeared in the admission test of the MBBS course for the academic session.

A student has stood first in the exam securing 87.25 marks in the tests.

Rush, chaos on

FROM PAGE 1

will remain suspended. CNG-run auto-rickshaws and ride-sharing vehicles will also fall under the restrictions.

Vehicles used for carrying goods and emergency services will remain out of the purview of the restrictions. People returning from or going abroad will not fall under the restrictions.

No one can go out from 6:00pm to 6:00am except for emergencies, including medicine, daily essentials, treatment and burial or cremations. Shops and malls will stay closed. Restaurants can sell food online and offer takeaway services.

The restrictions will not be applicable to offices, employees and transports involved in maintaining law and order and emergency services, relief distribution, health services, and electricity, water and gas supply, fire service, port activities, and telephone and internet services.

Banks will operate from 10:00am to 12:30pm. Public, private and autonomous offices can facilitate commute of their employees to workplaces, using their own transport on a limited scale. Industrial units and factories can do the same for their workers. Construction works will go on. Ekushey Boi Mela will also continue from noon to 5:00pm every day.

FRANTIC RUSH

People started leaving the capital from Saturday, hours after Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader disclosed the government decision to impose "lockdown" from today. More and more passengers thronged bus and launch terminals in the capital from that day.

But people crowded markets and terminals in their thousands yesterday.

Three of our correspondents visited 10 to 12 markets in the city and found huge rush of buyers in all of those.

Palash Ahmed, an employee of a private organisation, who went to a superstore in Mohammadpur yesterday morning, found prices of vegetables and fish had gone up.

"A lemon is now sold for Tk 26! Prices of fish have also increased," said Palash.

As the restrictions were about to take effect, many like him thronged superstores to stock up on groceries.

At various bus stations, people in large numbers were seen waiting to board long-haul buses but many of them failed to board any.

A number of passengers also complained of overcharging.

Two day labourers -- Mahub Alam and Abdus Salam -- who work at a power plant in Cumilla's Daudkandi area were waiting for a bus at Gabtoli bus terminal to go to Naogaon.

They were forced to buy four tickets -- two for each.

"We had to pay Tk 500 for each ticket. Usually, we buy it for Tk 400-450," Mahub said.

Seeking anonymity, a transport manager of SI Travels said, "We are asked not to carry passengers more than half of bus capacity. Please don't make it an issue now. We have to suspend operation tomorrow."

Suvenker Ghosh Rakesh, managing director of Shyamoli NR Travels, said they are seeing a huge rush of home-bound passengers from Saturday.

"We are seeing the same trend that we witnessed before the lockdown was imposed ahead of the Eid festivals last year," he told this newspaper yesterday.

"We have to keep 50 percent seats vacant as per the government directive. On the other hand, we are facing a huge rush of passengers... We are now trying our best to maintain the health safety guidelines," said Suvenker, also joint secretary of Bangladesh Bus Truck Owners Association.

Our correspondents in Manikganj and Tangail reported higher-than-usual traffic at Paturia-Daulatdia ferry terminal and on Dhaka-Tangail Highway.

In the capital, Kamalapur Railway Station saw a huge rush of home-bound passengers, many of whom flouted the health safety guidelines. Some commuter trains carried passengers more than 50 percent of capacity in violation of the government directive.

Asked, station Manager Masud Sarwar said, "We had to carry passengers more than half the capacity in some trains as many had bought advance tickets."

He further said a huge number of passengers thronged the ticket counters yesterday, and that no one was allowed to enter the platform without tickets.

Badiuzzaman Badal, senior vice-president of Bangladesh Inland Waterways (passenger carriers) Association, said there was a big rush of passengers at Sadarghat launch terminal.

He mentioned that they faced problems in dealing with large crowds of passengers after Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority suspended launch operations due to inclement weather yesterday evening.