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"... Hefajat-e-Islam is continuously carrying out mayhem ... which has become intolerable."
AWAMI LEAGUE GENERAL SECRETARY
OBAIDUL QUADER



"At this point in the pandemic, even the most deluded leaders would struggle to deny that our social, economic, and political systems are broken."
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S SECRETARY GENERAL AGNES CALLAMARD



"Scaling up production and equitable distribution remains the major barrier to ending the acute stage of the Covid-19 pandemic."
WHO CHIEF TEDROS ADHANOM GHEBREYESUS

'Lockdown' exists only on paper

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY and WASIM BIN HABIB

The ongoing restrictions to curb the Covid-19 surge across the country are showing signs of failure everywhere.

People in large numbers are coming out on the streets to buy commodities from shops or to have refreshments at tea-stalls in their neighbourhoods. They are going to workplaces by rickshaws and other modes of transport.

In the capital, one can see almost the same old picture: large-scale movement of people, moderate traffic congestions, public gatherings at kitchen markets and even demonstrations, this time by traders and shop owners.

Barring some shopping arcades and long-route transport services, the ambience outside hardly gives any indication that the weeklong restrictions are in place to check the rapid spike in Covid-19 infections and deaths.

Such half-hearted enforcement of restrictions has raised questions about their effectiveness with experts apprehending that such relaxed measures will not yield the desired results.

They pointed out that some restrictions, laid out in the government's 11-point directive, were not rational while some are contradictory.

And a lack of coordination and community engagement and the absence of supportive measures for the possible

sufferers due to the restrictions have made it difficult to implement most of the measures, they added.

The dismal picture of implementation of the restrictions comes at a time when the country is witnessing an alarming surge in Covid infections and deaths.

Yesterday, the country saw 7,626 Covid infections, the highest in a single day. The total number of cases now stands at 659,278.

Sixty-three people died from the virus in 24 hours till 8:00am, taking the death toll to 9,447, said the Directorate General of Health Services.

Talking to The Daily Star, Prof Liaquat Ali, a biomedical scientist, said, "To curb the surge in Covid infections, the government should have made realistic and scientific interventions that are implementable."

Many of the measures taken by the government are not implementable while some are contradictory and based on assumptions, he pointed out.

The restrictions could not be implemented due to a lack of coordination, community engagement and supports for the possible sufferers, he noted.

"It was not a well-thought-out plan. This will not bring the desired outcome," said Prof Liaquat, one of eight members of the government-formed expert committee to supervise, monitor and support the Covid-19 response.

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An elderly man with breathing difficulties due to Covid-19 being treated at Kurmitola General Hospital. Records of daily new cases are being broken frequently in recent weeks while over 60 people died because of the virus for the second day yesterday.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

S African variant dominant in Dhaka

Finds icddr, b study analysing samples

MOUDDUD AHMED SUJAN

The South African variant of Covid-19 is dominant in Dhaka, revealed an icddr, b study last night.

"A dramatic change in the distribution of variants was observed when the South African variant appeared. It became the most prevalent variant during the third week of March 2021 after replacing all other variants," said the study published at the icddr, b.

"Between March 18 and 24, we have analysed the genomic sequence of around 57 samples of Covid-19 positive patients. Of those, 46 or more than 80 percent were found to have been infected with

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Empty ICU bed hardest to find

ZYMA ISLAM and SHAHEEN MOLLAH

In the capital yesterday, finding an empty ICU bed was akin to finding a needle in a haystack.

Nazrul Islam, 75, died early in the morning after waiting a week for an ICU bed.

Nazrul, battling pneumonia and severe breathing difficulties, has been admitted at the post-coronary care unit at Dhaka Medical College Hospital since April 1. He was being administered concentrated oxygen via a high-flow nasal cannula in the unit, but that was not enough. Nazrul needed critical care.

He has been in line for an ICU bed since April 1. But at no point during the last week were the 20 Covid ICU beds empty for Nazrul.

According to statistics from Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), the number of empty ICU beds at DMCH has swung between zero and one since April 1, with the only exception being on April 2, when 6 beds were empty.

"We were going to the ICU every single day, imploring them for a bed. The doctors at DMCH were the ones who suggested it. We had a relative stationed in front of the ICU almost all day every day," said Nazrul's son Jamal Uddin, a journalist by profession.

Finally, Nazrul succumbed to the struggle at 2:00am in the morning. "We could not even transfer my father to any other ICU because he could not be taken off oxygen even for a minute. How would we put him inside an ambulance?"

Nazrul was not the only one dying while waiting for an ICU bed. Six hours after his death, 55-year-old Rokeya Begum breathed her last in the

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NEWS ANALYSIS

Have we learnt any lesson?

WASIM BIN HABIB

The government's decision to increase ICU beds in 10 public hospitals in Dhaka to treat a rising number of critical Covid-19 patients is certainly a step towards the right direction.

It, albeit late, seems to have grasped the gravity of the situation.

The healthcare authorities insist that the beds would be ready in a week to 10 days, taking the number of ICU beds in those hospitals to 200.

But what about the public hospitals outside Dhaka? Are those hospitals prepared to tackle the situation everyone is fearing?

Unfortunately, the answer is no.

Data from the health directorate backs it up.

There only have 602 ICU beds in the public and private hospitals across the country dedicated to Covid-19 patients. Of those, 433 beds were occupied as of yesterday.

This was not supposed be.

We should have been prepared far better and have had a lot more ICU beds ready.

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Crucial second dose vaccine rollout begins

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

The government starts administering the second shot of AstraZeneca's Covid-19 vaccine today amid fast-depleting stocks and a strained supply chain.

Experts say a second shot of the vaccine can ensure more consistent protection. Efficacy of the vaccine reaches 82 percent after the second dose from 76 percent after the first, according to AstraZeneca.

People who got the first jab during the piloting of the inoculation campaign on January 27-28 and 31, 160 others who got their first shot on February 7, the first day of the mass inoculation campaign, are likely to get their second shots today.

"The second dose will make more people safer, but we have to follow the health rules nevertheless," renowned virologist Prof Nazrul Islam told The Daily Star yesterday.

The former vice chancellor of Bangladesh Sheikh Mujib Medical University also suggested having antibody tests to assess the state of antibodies in people after inoculation.

Prof Sayedur Rahman, chairman of pharmacology at BSMMU, said, "The second dose boosts the immune system to produce enough antibodies. It also develops a memory cell response which lasts for a long time."

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QUARANTINE ALLOWANCE

Frontliners yet to get it in 10 months

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

Although 10 months have passed since the government's announcement of daily quarantine allowance, no doctor, nurse or healthcare frontliners in the war against Covid-19 received the money.

The frontliners, who would not avail government-provided free accommodation for quarantine, were supposed to get the money from July 1 last year.

"It is the sheer negligence on the government's part that it could not fulfil its promise. This will create mistrust between the government and the healthcare professionals," Prof Iqbal Arsalan,

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MOSQUES, PLACES OF WORSHIP No meeting, gathering before or after prayers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

No gatherings or meetings are allowed before and after prayers at mosques or any places of worship, the religious affairs ministry has said.

In an emergency circular that took effect yesterday, the ministry said it made the decision to help curb the surge in Covid-19 infections across the country.

About Tarabi prayers at mosques during Ramadan, it said the prayers have to be offered maintaining social distancing and in line with other health safety rules.

Earlier on April 5, the ministry had issued a circular saying people would not be allowed to have iftar and sehri at mosques during the holy month.

In yesterday's circular, it mentioned that soap, water, hand-washing facilities and sanitizers should be made available at the entrance of

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Motorcyclists of the ride-hailing services demonstrating in front of Dhaka Metropolitan Police office on Minto Road demanding that they be allowed to resume services. Struggling to cope with the second wave of the pandemic, the government announced a new set of restrictions this week. Story on page 12.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

N'GANJ VANDALISM Mamunul among 700 Hefajat men sued

STAR REPORT

Around 700 Hefajat men, including its Joint Secretary General Mamunul Haque, were sued yesterday over vandalising a resort and attacking police in Narayanganj's Sonargaon on April 3.

Law enforcers filed two cases with Sonargaon Police Station against 83 named and 500-600 unnamed Hefajat activists.

The other case filed by a local journalist with the same station had accused 17 named and 70-80 unnamed activists of the Qawmi madrasa-based Islamist organisation.

Mamunul was made accused in the two cases. Meanwhile, Rab detained Rafiqul Islam Madani, 27, also known as "Shishu Bokta", at his house in Purbadhola area of Netrakona on charge of spreading anti-state and provocative statements.

On April 3, Rafiqul, a speaker in waz mahfils, appeared on Facebook Live and spoke in support of Mamunul, following the incident at the resort.

"A Rab team detained him after he created chaos and made irresponsible statements," said Rab Director (legal and media wing) Commander Khandaker Al Moïn.

After the news of Rafiqul's detention spread, Mamunul uploaded a Facebook post demanding the former's immediate release.

Hefajat also issued a statement calling for the release. On March 25, police detained Rafiqul from Motijheel area during a demonstration, protesting the visit of Indian

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