



THE MARGINALISED IN PANDEMIC

Headed to debt traps

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Marginalised groups had to deal with financial hardship, income loss, reduce food consumption, and reach for their savings and take out loans to cope with the pandemic fallout.

A study unveiled yesterday warned that the members of the groups are at the risk of losing all their savings and falling into debt traps.

It said amid inadequate government support, a little over one in five households recovered from the downturn and the rest would need an average 13 months to be back to where they were before the pandemic.

The study, "Marginalised Communities in Bangladesh Dealing with Pandemic Fallout: Findings from a Household Survey", raised the flag that the fresh Covid restrictions imposed recently were likely to add to their woes.

The marginalised cutting down on food consumption might affect hunger and nutrition indicators, said the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, SEE PAGE 2 COL 3

- 78.5% households did not recover from hardships
- 80.6% households cut down their food expenses
- 70% households saw at least one member lose job



With oxygen support, 35-year-old Farhana Zannat sits inside an auto-rickshaw in front of the Mugda Medical College and Hospital around 10:30am yesterday. Farhana of Mirpur has been having breathing difficulties for the last three days. She bought the oxygen cylinder for Tk 27,000 after hearing about oxygen crisis at hospitals. She was admitted to the hospital later in the day. PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Will act tough to save people

PM on Covid pandemic

Bss, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said her government would take tougher steps to save lives of people amid the massive surge in the Covid-19 infection and deaths in the last few days.

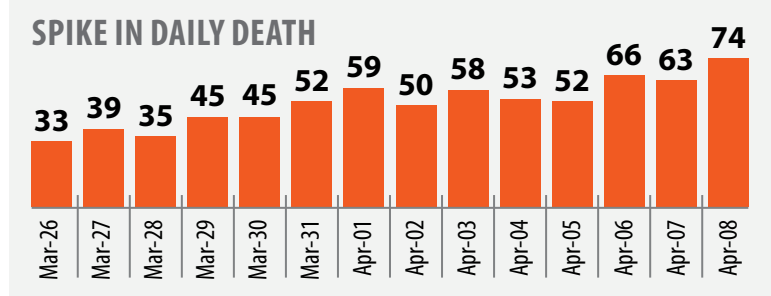
"Coronavirus has appeared as a pandemic. We are witnessing the blow. Although we have taken some measures to fight the pandemic, we might have to take tougher steps in future to save lives of the people and we must do it," she said.

The PM was addressing the concluding ceremony of the 71st foundation training course for fresh cadre service officers through a video conference from the Gono Bhaban.

The participants were connected to the event from the Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre (BPATC) and several other training centres. SEE PAGE 2 COL 6



Record 74 deaths mark 2nd dose vaccine roll-out



MOHAMMAD AHMED SUJAN

The government yesterday started administering the second dose of AstraZeneca's Covid-19 vaccine amid a steep rise in deaths and infections. A total of 81,323 people received their second shot of the two-dose vaccine, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

Besides, another 14,804 people got the first jab, taking the total number of first-dose recipients to 55,83,507.

Experts say the health emergency can turn from bad to worse anytime due to the continued relaxation of the restrictions imposed from April 5 to 11.

In the 24 hours preceding 8:00am yesterday, the DGHS reported 74 deaths -- the highest daily casualty since the first cases were detected on March 8 last year. It took the total confirmed death toll to 9,521.

The DGHS also reported 6,854 new cases yesterday, raising the number of active cases to 91,581. The positivity rate in that period was 20.65 percent, slightly lower than the previous day's positivity rate of 22.02 percent.

Prof Ridwanur Rahman, an infectious disease specialist, however said the daily death count hardly reflected the real picture.

"Around 60 percent of the patients dying in the hospitals dedicated for Covid-19 treatment were not tested. The deaths are not counted. The real picture might be more alarming," Prof Ridwanur Rahman told The Daily Star yesterday. SEE PAGE 2 COL 1

Curbs eased the day DGHS wants them tougher

Malls, shops may now be open for 8 hours

RASHIDUL HASAN and MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

The Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) yesterday wrote to the Prime Minister's Office, urging it to toughen restrictions in order to curb the transmission of Covid-19.

"We wrote to the PMO appealing for the enforcement of stricter restrictions like curfews," a top DGHS official, wishing not to be named, told The Daily Star.

He said health officials think it would not be possible to bring the situation under control otherwise.

DGHS officials met on Wednesday to discuss the pandemic situation of the country and then sent the letter that very day.

They said the way things are going in the name of restrictions are simply "suicidal" and the health department cannot afford such a setback.

The day the letter was sent, the government announced through a circular that shops and malls will be kept open for eight hours every day from today amid health experts' concerns.

Meanwhile, on that very day, country witnessed its highest number of Covid-19 deaths -- seventy-four people in just 24 hours till 8:00am.

The circular said shops and malls can be open from 9:00am to 5:00pm till April 13, on the condition of strict maintenance of health guidelines.

"Steps will be taken if health guidelines are violated," the circular read. SEE PAGE 2 COL 1

A cause for concern

Experts say vaccines less effective against South African variant but it can reduce severity of Covid-19, mortality rate

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

The dominance of the South African variant of coronavirus in Dhaka is a cause for concern, but experts said mass inoculation should go on although early studies suggested that the available vaccines are less effective against the variant.

Inoculation will reduce mortality and morbidity rates, they said. There is no conclusive data in the world that says the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, which Bangladesh rolled out on February 7, does not work against the SA variant, they added.

An icddr study, published on Wednesday, analysed 57 samples between March 18 and 24, and found 46 or over 80 percent infected with the same SA variant. SEE PAGE 2 COL 1

EXPERT'S VIEWS



S African variant spreading widely

DR KHONDOKER MEHEDI AKRAM

Observing the recent surge of coronavirus cases, it was assumed that a new Covid-19 strain had spread in Bangladesh.

The country has direct communication with UK, with hundreds of expatriates coming to Bangladesh every month. In December last year, a new strain of SEE PAGE 2 COL 3



As long-haul buses are not operating due to Covid-19 restrictions, people entering the capital had to get down in Amin Bazar and cross the Gabtoli bridge on foot before heading towards their destination in the city. Bottom, people crowd the Agrabad branch of Sonali Bank as banking hours have been reduced.



BUSINESS

Why Facebook, Google must pay for news

By this year, digital ad revenues are set to account for over 50% of global money spent on advertisements. Reports suggest, 52% of all digital ad spending in 2020 was led by search and social media, i.e. Google and Facebook. Bangladesh, experiencing the second-fastest ad market growth, has been estimated to be worth US\$ 1,311 million (Tk 11,165 crore) in 2020. News organisations create content; Facebook and Google use the content to invite advertisers to their platforms. Ads are being siphoned off to social media and media outlets are not getting their fair share. Australia is saving journalism by making Facebook and Google pay for news. Shouldn't Bangladesh?

STORY ON B1

Congratulations

to Hon'ble Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Father of the Nation (Bangabandhu), one of the renowned World Leaders, who achieved the title of Mother of Humanity and became the President of Climate Vulnerable Forum, is going to preside over the Climate Conference on the auspicious occasions to mark the centenary and golden jubilee of independence. Congratulations to the Hon'ble Prime Minister on behalf of the IDCOL Partner Organization (PO) Forum Trust for this outstanding recognition and robust exceptionalities.

Honorable Prime Minister,
It is a moment of pride for us, for your receiving of "Champions of The Earth" award for the successful establishment of initiatives taken against the adverse effects of climate change in Bangladesh.

With your visionary dynamic leadership, proper guidance and personal presence, we have succeeded story to cover solar home system that can bring us one step ahead towards the direction of success. In 18th February 2012 we have installed 10 lac solar home system in Sandwip and Chittagong. Later on, on 12th May 2013 we have the story of installing 20 lac and on 5th November 2014 have record of 30 lac in Dhaka. These glorious moments still spark fire within us. In its continuity, we, the PO Forum members organizations work IDCOL SHS and TR-KABITA projects and established almost 53 lakhs solar home systems in houses, 3 lakhs solar streetlights and 1650 solar irrigation pumps in remote areas of Bangladesh. These solar systems power generation capacity is almost 300MW. The following achievements in this advancement of success are commendable:

- On the glorious occasion of Mujib centenary, every household in the country is lit-up by grid line or solar electricity. The solar home system program has helped education of children of backward communities in remote areas, involvement of rural women in economic activities at night, business activities of hat bazars and shops for extended periods and lastly the solar power system has boosted our rural economy by increasing the appliance of information technology and entertainment purposes in remote areas.
- With your kind guidance, the TR-KABITA project under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief has been used to electrify the poor and needy families with government funding, to ensure social security by installing solar street lights and solar in various educational institutions. Keeping, the installation of solar street lights across the country has ensured the night security of rural life, illuminated rural Bengal, mosques, temples and ferry ghats. City street lighting facilities have been extended to villages as well.
- Solar irrigation program has brought a good start in environment-friendly agricultural production and agro-based rural socio-economic development. We firmly believe within few years there will be a significant change in agricultural productivity with the use of Green Energy. Already under the solar irrigation project, around 75 thousand acres' farm land has been transformed from two to four croplands. Around 80 thousand farmer families involved in this program have been capable of conducting more agricultural activities in their day to day life.
- Through various projects implemented by us, about 1 lakh employment opportunities have been created directly and indirectly at the marginal level in the country. A certain number of industrial plants have been established as well. Avoiding import of more than 2 lakh tons of diesel and kerosene, the government is saving huge amount of foreign exchange as well as helping to prevent emission of Carbon Dioxide.
- Our office and manpower presence exists across the country at Upazila and even Union level to ensure after-sales service of solar power projects.

Honourable Prime Minister,
Considering Bangladesh's geographical location and socio-economic potential, the use of renewable energy in dealing with natural disasters, emergencies and the adverse effects of climate change has opened up new possibilities and confidence.

We believe that using the skilled manpower, infrastructure and experience developed by IDCOL partner organizations over the past 20 years will give you discretion and timely guidance in implementing new projects to achieve the country's socio economic development and SDG targets.

These are effective projects in the current context:

- * To provide Uninterrupted Electricity service in all health care center in Bangladesh, solar power establishment is needed.
- * To install solar streetlights ensuring night security and establishing "my village, my town" motto.
- * Establishment of small size solar irrigation pumps for the betterment of farmers and agricultural development.
- * Adaptation of solar power projects to ensure digitalization of all educational institutions in Bangladesh.

We humbly request that the benefits of renewable energy under the TR-KABITA project be kept in public life and that the involvement of "IDCOL PO" in the long-term maintenance of installed systems be considered.

May Allah Almighty grant you good health, longevity and success.

Yours obediently,

Munawar Misbah Moin
President

Md. Rabiul Islam
General Secretary

IDCOL PO Forum Trust