

BANGLADESH UPDATE



6,458
New cases in 24hrs



6,66,132
Total cases



9,521
Deaths



5,65,030
Recoveries



2,907,666
Deaths



134,191,421
Total cases

A cause for concern

FROM PAGE 1
The samples were collected from 13 districts, the majority being from Dhaka.

A study in South Africa, published on February 7, found the AstraZeneca vaccine less effective against the variant. But it also said the vaccine helped reduce the risk of severity of the disease.

The World Health Organization on 15 February recommended that the AstraZeneca vaccine be rolled out, even in countries where the SA variant, also known as B.1.351, or other similar variants are circulating.

Prof Sayedur Rahman, chairman of pharmacology at the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, said, "Although there are dilemmas, many countries across the world are using the vaccine. Since we don't have a choice right now, we have to make the best of the vaccine."

"Someone who has taken the vaccine has less risk of contracting the disease. The most important part is that it lowers the degree of severity of Covid-19."

Regardless of whether one has been inoculated or not, people must wear masks and maintain social distancing, because these are more effective than anything else.

Mushtaq Hossain, adviser to the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), said the clinical trial conducted in South Africa was not conclusive and had not been accepted worldwide.

"The observation is that this [Oxford] vaccine is less effective against the SA variant. But it is still very good in preventing a patient from becoming critically ill," he said.

It is scientifically evident that this vaccine works against all the variants, said the noted epidemiologist. "We are closely monitoring the situation and there is no reason to worry."

Bangladesh has inoculated 5.5 million people with the first dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine. The campaign for the second dose started yesterday. Many countries across the world are inoculating people against coronavirus with this low-cost vaccine.

The UK, SA, and Brazilian variants of the virus have spread all over the world in recent weeks, according to different studies.

These variants are said to be more

transmissible and have gone through new genetic changes, which may impact clinical manifestation and vaccine effectiveness.

The SA variant was first detected in the Nelson Mandela bay area in October, 2020.

The Vaccines and Infectious Diseases Analytics (VIDA) Research Unit at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg on February 7 released findings on the effectiveness of AstraZeneca vaccine against the SA variant.

The results showed that a two-dose AstraZeneca vaccine did not protect against mild to moderate Covid-19 in case of the SA variant. The trial was conducted on 2,026 participants.

VIDA Executive Director Prof Shabir Madhi said, "This vaccine may still help protect high-risk individuals with co-morbidities from contracting severe Covid-19 disease, having to be hospitalised, mechanically ventilated, or dying."

A laboratory study suggests that the SA variant may reduce protective antibodies elicited by the Pfizer Inc/ BioNTech SE vaccine by two-thirds, and it is not clear if the shot will be effective against the mutation, Reuters reported on February 18, quoting the two companies.

The study found that the vaccine was still able to neutralise the virus and there is no evidence that the variant reduces vaccine protection, the companies said.

US drugmaker Moderna said the actual efficacy of its vaccine against the South African variant is yet to be determined. The company has previously said it believes the vaccine will work against the variant, said the Reuters report.

"There was a small study in South Africa which showed the Oxford vaccine was less effective. But we do not have adequate data to reach a conclusion," Dr Mustafizur Rahman, senior scientist at the icddr, told The Daily Star yesterday.

"Irrespective of the vaccine's efficacy, we must follow the health safety guidelines. The virus mutates continuously and the scientists are updating the vaccines. We should not panic."

Record 74 deaths

FROM PAGE 1
"We are now testing roughly 35,000 people every day. If the number of tests doubled, we would have gotten about twice as many new cases and deaths."

According to the DGHS data, 451 patients were being treated in Intensive Care Units and 4,968 in general beds at the Covid-19 dedicated hospitals across the country.

Since the second week of March, the daily numbers have frequently been breaking records.

On Tuesday, 66 deaths were recorded -- the highest till it was surpassed by yesterday's count.

Meanwhile, British-Swedish multinational pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca has served a legal notice to Serum Institute of India over delays in shipment of the vaccine.

"AstraZeneca has sent us a legal notice and the Indian government is also aware of that. I cannot comment on the legal notice as it is confidential, but we are examining all avenues to amicably manage and resolve legal disputes over contractual obligations that Serum Institute is not able to fulfil due to its prioritisation of Indian supplies. Everyone has been very understanding so far. The government is evaluating what it can do to resolve the issue," NDTV yesterday quoted Serum CEO Adar Poonawalla as saying.

The CEO earlier said Serum's

production capacity to manufacture Covishield -- one of the two vaccines being administered in India -- was "very stressed" amid pressures from soaring cases in the country.

"The globe needs this vaccine and we are prioritising the needs of India at the moment and we are still short of being able to supply... to every Indian that needs it," Poonawalla had said.

However, the Indian government yesterday said there was no ban on export of Covid-19 vaccines made in the country but that the supply of the doses would continue taking into account India's domestic requirement, reports our New Delhi correspondent.

"We have already said that the supply of vaccines will continue taking into account our domestic requirement," Arindam Bagchi, spokesman of India's external affairs ministry, told the weekly media briefing in reply to a series of questions on the issue of India's Vaccine Maitri policy.

"Let me reiterate that there is no ban on the export of vaccine and a visit to the MEA's website on the supply of made-in-India vaccine abroad would give you a clear idea of that. The supply position is updated from time to time," he said.

To a question about AstraZeneca sending a legal notice to Serum, the MEA spokesman said "this is a question that should be directed at the company itself."

Curbs eased the day DGHS

FROM PAGE 1
It was not mentioned whether the shops and malls would remain open after April 13.

MA Faiz, public health expert and a former director general of the DGHS, yesterday told The Daily Star that the government's decision might worsen the Covid-19 situation and have an adverse impact on public health.

The government should think of alternative measures, including providing cash and food incentives for workers and traders during the shutdown.

"The government decision was not proper nor based on reality..." he added.

Earlier on April 4, the Cabinet Division issued an 11-point directive to be followed from 6:00am Monday to 12:00am on April 11 to contain the spread of the virus. The directive also said punitive actions will be taken against violators of the directives.

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

Banks will operate from 10:00am to 12:30pm, while 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, while

construction works will be going on. Ekushy Boi Mela will also continue from noon to 5:00pm every day.

On Wednesday, bus operators resumed services in all 11 cities across the country after a two-day long pause.

The authorities on Tuesday issued a circular allowing public transport services in the cities from 6:00am to 6:00pm. Many buses in the capital, however, were seen operating even after the stipulated time.

Vehicles, except for the ride-sharing motorbikes, resumed operation in the capital from Wednesday.

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

Meanwhile, 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.

Traders of different shops in the city said businesses, especially those related to clothing, get a huge boost with the coming of Pahela Baishakh and Eid-ul-Fitr. Almost half of the total year's business usually takes place during these two biggest festivals of the country.

Owners of different markets, including New Market, Gausia, Gulistan and Mirpur, took to the streets demanding the opening of shops and malls following Monday's partial lockdown.



Visiting Indian Chief of Army Staff Gen Manoj Mukund Naravane hands his Bangladeshi counterpart Gen Aziz Ahmed a box containing one lakh doses of Covid-19 vaccine at the Army Headquarters in Dhaka yesterday.

PHOTO: ISPR

Indian army chief arrives in Dhaka

Hands his Bangladeshi counterpart 100,000 vaccine doses as gift

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Chief of Army Staff of Indian Army Gen Manoj Mukund Naravane handed over 100,000 doses of Covid-19 vaccine as gift to Bangladesh Army Chief General Aziz Ahmed yesterday.

The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine shots, produced in India, were handed over at the Army Headquarters in Dhaka, according to a statement of the ISPR.

Gen Naravane arrived in Dhaka yesterday for a five-day visit on invitation from Bangladesh Army Chief Gen Aziz Ahmed.

Naravane is being accompanied by his spouse, Veena Naravane, and a two-member delegation, according to a statement of the Indian High Commission.

During his stay in Bangladesh, the Indian Army Chief is scheduled to pay courtesy calls to the Army, Navy, and acting Air Force chiefs of Bangladesh and meet other senior officers of the Bangladesh Army.

He will also be visiting various military stations and pay tribute to the members of the Bangladesh Armed Forces who made the supreme sacrifice during Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971 by laying a wreath at the altar of Shikha Anirban in Dhaka Cantonment.

The Indian Army Chief will share his experience during the seminar on United Nations Peace Support Operations.

He will also witness the culmination exercise, hardware display, and closing ceremony of the joint military Exercise Shantir Ogroshena.

The visit of the Indian Army Chief will further strengthen the close and fraternal ties existing between the armed forces of the two countries, the statement said.

Headed to debt traps

FROM PAGE 1
Bangladesh study carried out in February on 1,600 households of 10 marginalised groups.

Covid-19 has multi-dimensional impacts on marginalised groups, said Convener of Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh and Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue, Debapriya Bhattacharya, at the virtual launching programme of the study.

Its first impact was on employment, then on income, and subsequently on consumption. It reduced savings and increased loans. It will have a long-term effect, he said.

The study defined financial hardship as "current income not sufficient to manage current expenditure".

While presenting the study, East West University's economics teacher Estiaque Bari, one of the researchers, said about 79 percent marginalised households experienced financial hardship during the Covid-19 fallout.

Of them, only 21.5 percent households managed to recover taking an average five months to do so. The remaining 78.5 percent households are expected to take an average 13 months to recover.

The data for the study was collected via face-to-face survey of marginalised groups, including people from chars, haors, coastal and slum areas; dalits; indigenous people; people with disabilities; micro, small, and medium entrepreneurs; and migrant workers who returned home.

The study said four out of five households cut down expenses on food while 64.5 percent households reduced non-food expenses.

Of those that cut down food expenses, 47.2 percent reduced the number items containing protein, 37.7 percent cut the number of items in a meal, 6.8 percent reduced the number

- **20.8%** households withdrew their savings and on average they withdrew **Tk 34,462**
- **47.9%** households took loan and on average they took loan amounting to **Tk 52,533**
- Govt support was inadequate as only **37.3%** households received it

of meals, and 9.8 percent compromised on baby food.

The study said 20.8 percent households reached for their savings and on average withdrew Tk 34,462, mostly between April and May last year.

It said 47.9 percent took out an average Tk 52,533 in loans over the same period and that it would take two years and one month to repay the principal amount at the current rate of household savings.

At least one member of the 70 percent households studied lost their jobs or had to shut down businesses.

Estiaque also said that at least one member of 68 percent households resumed work. "But after re-joining work, their income did not reach the previous level."

The study said only 37 percent of the marginalised households received government support and that the combined support from non-state actors, like family, friends, neighbours, NGOs, and charities, was more than the government aid.

The study shows that 21.9 percent marginalised people received support from NGOs, 11.9 from family, friends and neighbours, and 8.6 from charities.

About 45 percent households received no assistance.

Debapriya said government assistance was inadequate not due to scarcity of resources, rather there were some problems with approach.

Many considered that the Covid-19 crisis would be solved quickly, he said. "We talked about mid-term planning to face the crisis ahead of the last budget but at the end we found the as-usual budget."

He said there were some lack of awareness of the authorities concerned. "There are also a tendency of denial regarding the Covid-19 issue. If it continues, the problem will prolong and people will need to suffer more."

He recommended that the government give financial incentives and food aid to the marginalised groups.

The study also suggested explicit allocations under social safety net programmes and beyond in the upcoming budget.

It also proposed formation of a Social Solidarity Fund for Covid-19, based on public-private partnership.

Debapriya said the website of the fund should clearly mention the money being donated and spent to ensure transparency.

"Many countries have such funds," he added.

A mid-term national plan connecting local government, local administration, and NGOs would help to remedy the situation, he said.

The study said 28.4 percent households believed that social conflict increased during the crisis, 21.6 percent thought violence against women went up, 4.6 percent and 2.6 percent believed that violence against children and dropouts increased.

Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh core group member and CPD Executive Director Prof Mustafizur Rahman also spoke at the programme.

S African variant spreading widely

FROM PAGE 1
Covid-19 (B117) was detected in the UK.

All these factors led to the assumption that the second wave of coronavirus in Bangladesh was caused by the new UK variant.

But a recent study of icddr,b reveals that the South African variant (B1351) of Covid-19 is dominant in Dhaka. This finding forces a rethink.

The researchers completed genome sequencing of 57 samples in the third of week of March. Of these, they detected the South African variant in 46 cases -- meaning that the South African variant was found in 81 percent of the Covid-19 samples.

On March 21, another organisation -- Child Health Research Foundation (CHRF) -- collected 22 samples. After genome sequencing, the South African Variant was found in 80 percent cases while 10 percent contained the UK variant.

Both findings suggest that the South African variant is spreading across Bangladesh. Perhaps this is the reason behind the recent skyrocketing of coronavirus cases.

Between March 12 and 17, icddr,b sequenced genomes of 99 samples. Of these, 64 samples (65 percent) contained the South African variant and the remaining 12 samples had the UK variant.

But the organisation could not identify any South African variant while conducting variant surveillance among 248 samples between January 1, 2021 and March 11, 2021.

In the first week of January, icddr,b identified the UK variant in only one sample among 52 tested, or two percent. Since the last week of January, the frequency of UK variants among the test samples has been increasing steadily, and it moved up to 52 percent in the first week of March. After the second week of March, the presence of the UK variant suddenly started decreasing and the South African variant started taking its spot.

The question now is: what is the connection between the surge of Covid-19 cases and the emergence of the South African variant?

Both the South African and the UK variants have gone through N501Y mutation within their spike protein, which makes them highly contagious.

However, the spike protein of the South African variant has gone through a critical mutation titled E484, which gives it resistance against vaccines and the capability to re-infect easily.

In Bangladesh, the second wave started from the first week of March, but the surge of Covid-19 cases was evident from mid-March. From the last week of March, the number of affected patients increased from 3,000 to 5,000 per day, and in April, the daily numbers reached the 7,000 mark.

During this period, and specifically between 12 March and 24 March, 64 to 80 percent of collected samples were the South African variant. These samples were collected from 13 districts.

The icddr,b collected 751 Covid-positive samples from these 13 districts, and separated 443 samples with increased viral load. It conducted genome sequencing on those separated samples and identified 110 unique South African variants in 156 samples.

One caveat is that considering the total population and the numbers of daily test cases, 443 is not a significant sample size -- it is very difficult to definitively say how much the South African variant has spread.

However, with the trends mentioned above, it is well within the realms of possibility that the South African and UK variants have, or could, spread across Bangladesh, and the presence of these foreign strains are responsible for the recent surge of Covid-19 cases.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS COVISHIELD AGAINST SOUTH AFRICAN VARIANT?

The phase-3 clinical trial results published in The New England Journal for Medicine on March 16 shows that the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine is only 10 percent effective against the South African variant.

Also, tests conducted in the lab reveals that the neutralising antibody created by the Oxford vaccine cannot fully destroy the South African variant. Thus, it can be opined that the Covishield vaccine -- the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine manufactured by Serum Institute of India -- is not completely able to prevent infections by the South African variant.

However, it has not yet been tested whether this vaccine can prevent deaths caused by severe cases of Covid-19

infection. The scientists at Oxford believe that the vaccine can prevent this kind of deaths.

Mass vaccination has been rolled out in Bangladesh with the Covishield vaccine. But there is a possibility of failure of the vaccination programme if the South African variant spreads massively all over the country.

That is why variant surveillance must be conducted widely. A map must be prepared identifying what type of variant has spread in which region.

The districts or regions that have already been infected by the South African variant must be disconnected from other regions. The spread of the South African variant can be resisted, if region-based variant containment can be done, although it may already be too late.

Alternative thinking must be initiated to buy a vaccine other than Covishield. The US made Novavax, a protein-based vaccine 60 percent effective against the South African variant.

India's Serum institute will produce this vaccine in large quantities. US corporation Johnson and Johnson's adenoviral vector-based vaccine is also 64 percent effective against this variant.

Both vaccines need to be stored within two to eight degrees Celsius, which fits the existing cold chain system of Bangladesh.

Laboratory tests have proven that the US Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine is also effective against this variant. A small-scale clinical trial with 800 participants in South Africa -- where B1351 is prevalent -- has shown that this vaccine is 100 percent effective in terms of preventing illness. However, negative 20 degrees Celsius temperature is required to preserve the Pfizer vaccine.

The Covishield vaccine may not be able to prevent mild and moderate infections caused by the South African variant. But it is assumed that the vaccine can save lives from severe cases of Covid-19. So, there is no alternative to taking the Covishield vaccine shots.

Maintaining health safety rules and wearing masks are the key ways to resist infection of coronavirus, whatever the variant is. So, caution is important. Follow the health safety rules, of which there is no alternative now for mankind.

Dr Khondoker Mehedi Akram: MBBS, MSc, PhD, Senior Research Associate, University of Sheffield, UK

Will act tough

FROM PAGE 1
Hasina asked the fresh officers to be cautious in maintaining health guidelines to protect themselves and others from Covid-19.

"After going to your workplace, you all have to give special focus so that people abide by the health guidelines."

The PM reiterated her call to the people to follow health protocols, particularly wearing masks, as she described it as the most important thing to protect oneself and others nearby.

"The life and livelihoods of the people must go on. We cannot inflict the people with sufferings. But maintaining health guidelines is crucially important," she said.

Hasina suggested all inhale steam from hot water after returning home and gargle which effectively work against the virus.

Briefly highlighting the measures taken by her government for the overall development of the country, the premier said they have reduced poverty to 20 percent from 41 percent and achieved 8.15 percent GDP growth in the last 12 years.

Describing the fresh cadre service officers as soldiers of 2041, she said, "You all have to work with patriotism and the mentality of providing service to the people being imbued with the spirit of Liberation War. You have to build the country with the spirit of Liberation War."

The PM said people of Bangladesh -- including the poor, farmers, labourers -- are the owners of the country. "I want you [fresh officers] to serve the people keeping this in mind."

Hasina said her government has been awarding fellowships, scholarships and donations for higher degree and higher training of public servants.

Stating that the government is developing all training centres across the country, the PM said her government has taken a project to develop the BPATC with all modern facilities.

Once the project is completed, around 2,000 government officers will be able to take training at a time at the BPATC, she added.

The premier said the tenure of the six-month training course would be extended further.

Hasina said her government has been pursuing development activities in such a way that no region of the country is deprived of development.

Noting that her government will give home to every homeless and landless people, she asked the fresh officers to work with sincerity in this regard.

State Minister for Public Administration Farhad Hossain, and Senior Secretary Shaikh Yusuf Harun of the public administration ministry, also spoke on the occasion.

The state minister, on behalf of the PM, later handed certificates to the officers who secured top three positions in the training course.

BPATC Rector (secretary) Rakib Hossain presented the results of the training course to the PM and administered oath to 307 fresh officers, including 79 females.