

BANGLADESH UPDATE 6,028 New cases in 24hrs 6,97,985 Total cases 9,891 Deaths 5,85,966 Recoveries GLOBAL UPDATE 2,964,752 Deaths 137,723,499 Total cases

Grief, fright

FROM PAGE 1 consecutive year, Bangalees will celebrate the new year at home as the day coincides with the beginning of a seven-day nationwide lockdown imposed to stem the spread of Covid-19. Like last year, people will have to welcome the first day of the Bengali calendar amid the grim reality caused by the second wave of the deadly disease. There will be no festivity or cultural practices, rooted deeply in secular ethos, no rendition of the song "Esho hey Baishakh, esho esho" under the banyan tree at Ramna Batumul in the capital. And just like last year, there will be no outpouring of people on the streets or colourful festivals around Dhaka University campus through which the Bangalees will welcome the new year. However, there will be a token Mangal Shobhajatra, a colourful, ceremonial procession, which is the mainstay of the festival, from the Dhaka University's Faculty of Fine Arts. Last year, the procession was halted due to the pandemic. The university authorities will allow a maximum of 30 people in the rally, which would be recorded and sent to the media. The government has already suspended all public programmes, asking all not to hold any mass gathering or outdoor celebrations for Pahela Baishakh. The country is now seeing an alarming spike in Covid-19 cases and deaths for the last one month. In this situation, hospitals have been overwhelmed by the increasing number of patients. The DU's fine arts faculty was found to be quiet yesterday, even though this place would be brimming with teachers and students preparing for the festival before the global pandemic began. "It's because of the Covid-19 that we could not build the structure of the Mangal Shobhajatra," said Shakhawat Rony, a student of the Department of Drawing and Printing of Fine Art. Another student, Tahsina Ferdous Lina, said they had been waiting for this day eagerly but culture and heritage had to take a back seat due to Covid-19. "I'll miss the celebration," she said. DU Vice-Chancellor Prof Md Akhtaruzzaman said they will celebrate the day on a limited scale. "There will not be any kind of public gathering," he said. Mughal Emperor Akbar introduced the tradition of celebrating the Bangla New Year -- Naba Barsha -- to mark the closing of the annual tax collection. Traditionally, traders and shopkeepers open a new "halkhata" (account register) on this day and celebrate it by offering sweetmeat to their clients. In the course of time, it evolved into a day of mass celebration and an integral part of the Bangalee culture. It has been considered a non-communal festival as people irrespective of religion, sect, class and creed celebrate the day as one race.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina addresses the nation yesterday on the eve of the Bengali New Year 1428. PHOTO: PTI

Do not panic, govt with you

FROM PAGE 1 wherever the impact of this deadly virus is intensifying. She said the government alongside saving people's lives is keeping a watch so that country's economy and people's lives and livelihoods do not fall apart. "With cooperation from all we have taken some steps. As a result, last year we were able to face the coronavirus pandemic successfully." The PM said the government fixed four key activities last year to face the possible adverse impacts of coronavirus. They were: increasing public expenditure prioritising employment generation; formulating stimulus package for reviving economic activities, keeping labourers and workers in their jobs and keeping competitiveness of entrepreneurs; expanding social safety net programmes to fulfill the basic needs of people living under the poverty line, day labourers, and those engaged non-institutionally; and increasing supply of money to overcome the adverse impact on the economy in a way to make sure that there is no inflation. "Our activities are continuing based

on these four principles. We have already announced 23 stimulus packages of Tk 1,24,053 crore," she added. "DON'T WORRY" Hasina said some 2.5 crore people have been brought under the coverage of various government assistance programmes and steps have been taken for uninterrupted production at mills and factories and increasing agricultural production. "There's no need to be worried, the government is always beside you. I have taken steps for the poor and lower income people after the second wave hit the country." The PM said the government allocated Tk 807.65 crore for employment generation in rural areas and more than Tk 672 crore for holy Ramadan and Eid-ul-Fitr. This will benefit 1,24,42,000 lower income families. 5.6M RECEIVED FIRST SHOT Talking about vaccination against Covid-19, Hasina said more than 56 lakh people have taken the first dose of the vaccine. "Those who've taken the first shot are now taking the second one. Gradually, we will bring everyone under

the vaccination programme." Referring to the comments of health experts, the premier said there is no assurance that one will be fully protected from the virus after receiving the vaccine. "So, after taking the vaccine, we will have to maintain health guidelines too." Hasina urged everyone to be careful and ensure protection for themselves, their family members and neighbours. "So, gatherings have to be avoided and everyone should wear a mask while going outside. After returning home, one should get cleaned and take vapour from hot water." She greeted the countrymen on the occasion of Bengali New Year and the beginning of Holy Ramadan. Hasina also asked all to stay home. "Like the previous year, Bangalees will have to celebrate Pahela Boishakh festival digitally staying at home." State-owned Bangladesh Betar and Bangladesh Television simultaneously broadcast her address. Private television channels and radio stations also aired the PM's speech.

Hardly effective on variants

FROM PAGE 1 recovered patients. These are produced when the body's immune system reacts to the antigen in the virus. Convalescent Plasma therapy constitutes of taking the blood of a convalescent patient or a person who has recovered from Covid-19 and doing a transfusion into the body of a patient with an active infection. Previous studies have shown that the antibodies in the convalescent blood fight the antigens in the blood of the patient. In the absence of any sure-fire treatment, plasma therapy has been commonly used by doctors across the country to try and control the infection since the pandemic started. However, the study said, "Seven out of nine plasma samples inhibited entry driven by the S [spike] proteins of the B.1.351 [South African] and P.1 [Brazilian] variants less efficiently as compared to entry driven by WT [Wuhan] S protein." The limitation of the study was that instead of a live virus, they used a "pseudotype" which "faithfully mimics key aspects of SARS-CoV-2 entry into cells [...] and antibody-mediated neutralisation". "These results suggest that individuals previously infected with WT [Wuhan] SARS-CoV-2 might only be partially protected against infection with B.1.351 [South African] and P.1 [Brazilian] variants of SARS-CoV-2," the study added. Recently icddr,b conducted a study where they tested 57 samples in the third week of March and found that over 80 percent of patients were infected with the South African variant. Similarly, Child Health Research Foundation sequenced the genomes of 22 SARS-CoV-2 samples in March and found that 19 were either the UK variant or the South African variant. The Cell journal article goes on to state that these results suggest that SARS-CoV-2 scape neutralising antibody responses, which has important implications for efforts to contain the pandemic. The study also found that there

was "reduced neutralization by sera from BN162b2 [Pfizer] vaccinated individuals." "Twelve out of 15 sera showed a markedly reduced inhibition of entry driven by the S proteins of the B.1.351 and P.1 variants," said the study. "To sum up, these results suggest that BNT162b2 may offer less robust protection against infections by the B.1.351 and P.1 variants." The Pfizer vaccine however is not used in Bangladesh -- the ongoing vaccination drive uses the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine. Studies about how well this vaccine performs against the South African variant are yet to be observed. Similar results were shown by another study published in the Nature Medicine journal last month, titled "Sensitivity of infectious SARS-CoV-2 B.1.1.7 [UK] and B.1.351 variants to neutralizing antibodies" and conducted by researchers from France. The researchers found that the South African variant may increase the risk of infection in immunised individuals. They took sera from 58 convalescent individuals and 19 Pfizer-vaccinated individuals. "After 9 months convalescent sera had a mean sixfold reduction in neutralizing titers, and 40 percent of the samples lacked any activity against B.1.351," said the report. "The Pfizer vaccine was similarly "less efficacious against B.1.351," they found. "Faster-spreading SARS-CoV-2 variants acquired a partial resistance to neutralizing antibodies generated by natural infection or vaccination," said the study, which unlike the German research used the live virus for its testing. The German study was done by researchers from the German Primate Center, George-August-University Göttingen, Ulm University medical Center, Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nuremberg among others, while the French study was done by Institut Pasteur, Vaccine Research Institute, University de Paris, University de Tours, etc.

WB to provide \$500m more

FROM PAGE 1 \$1.04 billion to implement three projects, including purchase of vaccine. Economic Relations Division (ERD) Secretary Fatima Yasmin and Mercy Miyang Tembon, country director of the World Bank, Dhaka office, signed the agreements on behalf of the respective organisations. The WB is providing the \$500 million loan for buying vaccine under the "Covid-19 Emergency Response and Pandemic Preparedness" project being implemented by the Health Services Division. An ERD official told The Daily Star that Bangladesh has sought financial support worth \$2.4 billion from different international donors, including WB, Asian Development Bank and Japan, for purchasing the vaccine. ADB has already agreed to provide \$940 million, while its board of directors may approve the funding next month, he said, preferring not to be named. All the donors may have the same condition for purchasing vaccine recognised by WHO or stringent regulatory authorities or COVAX, he added. On March 18, WB's Board of Executive Directors approved \$500 million in financing from the International Development Association (IDA) to help Bangladesh vaccinate 54 million people against Covid-19. The additional financing will help the country procure safe and effective vaccines, expand vaccine storage

facilities, and distribute vaccines to about 31 percent of its population, in support of the government's prioritised plan of covering 40 percent of the population in the first phase of vaccination, according to the World Bank. The project duration is from April 2020 to December 2023. The funding will help Bangladesh build capacity through establishment of Vaccine Testing Lab (WHO maturity level-3) in the Directorate General of Drug Administration, said an ERD press release yesterday. It aims at ensuring quality of vaccines by keeping the Cold Chain System intact in vaccine storage and distribution, said the release. The loan is repayable in 30 years with a grace period of five years and the interest rate is 1.25 percent, service charge 0.75 percent and commitment charge 0.50 percent on the disbursed amount, it added. Meanwhile, another loan agreement of \$500 million was signed yesterday between the government and the WB's International Development Association (IDA). The project aims at promoting private investment, job creation, and environmental sustainability in participating economic zones and software technology parks in Bangladesh, said another ERD press release. The project has been undertaken with the initiative of the finance ministry's Economic Relations Division. The implementing agencies are Bangladesh

Economic Zones Authority (BEZA) and Bangladesh Hi-Tech Park Authority. A technical assistance project named Central Coordination Unit of the Private Investment and Digital Entrepreneurship Project under ERD will play the coordinating role between the implementing agencies and World Bank and oversee monitoring and evaluation, fund flows and utilization and thus will ensure smooth operation of the project, said the release. The activities to be carried out by the project include creating an environment conducive to private investment and sustainable development, performing all activities through Public-Private Partnership by forming a special operation unit at BEZA and developing Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Shilpa Nagar as a green and environment friendly industrial city in phases. On Monday, the government also inked a financing agreement with the WB's International Development Association for a credit amount of Tk 339 crore to implement "Additional Financing for Digitising Implementation Monitoring and Public Procurement Project". The project will be implemented by Central Procurement Technical Unit under Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division and the Ministry of Planning. The loan is repayable in 30 years with a grace period of five years. The closing date of this project is December 31, 2023, added the release.

New symptoms

FROM PAGE 1 Dr Tareq was the one who in July 2020 had claimed that the drug Ivermectin has an efficacy in reducing viral load against the novel coronavirus. Based on his claim, the icddr,b later conducted a study and found this to be true. Talking about the symptoms, Dr Md Robed Amin, secretary (research) at Bangladesh Society for Medicine, however, said, "These are anecdotal symptoms, not any findings of any scientific study. But these have some sort of significance as there is no proven cure for Covid-19." "VARIANT CAN BE A REASON" There is no scientific study on why more patients were showing symptoms different from those exhibited last year. Prof Tareq Alam said, "Most probably, the new variants of novel coronavirus -- the UK variant and the South African variant -- are to blame for this. These two strains are 70 to 100 percent more infectious than the previous variants found in our country." Prof Ridwanur Rahman, an infectious disease specialist at Universal Medical College Hospital, said a scientific study was required to reach any conclusion. He, however, said, "The lungs getting infected faster and higher infection rates among women and

young people were also noticed in South Africa. We're observing a similar situation here. So, the variant can be a reason, but we need to carry out a study on it." CASES, DEATHS KEEP RISING Sixty-nine people died from Covid-19 in 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday, according to a press release issued by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS). With this, the Covid-19 death toll in the country reached 9,891. The death rate stood at 1.42 percent, it said. On Monday, the country had reported a record 83 coronavirus deaths for a single day. At least 6,028 new infections were recorded in the 24 hours ending at 8:00am yesterday, taking the total number of people infected to 6,97,985, said the release. The current positivity rate is 18.29 percent while the total positivity rate stands at 13.76 percent. A total of 32,955 samples were tested across the country in those 24 hours, said the release. At least 4,853 Covid-19 patients recovered during the period. The total number of recoveries stands at 5,85,966 and the recovery rate at 83.95 percent. Among the 69 deceased, 43 were men and 26 were women, added the release.

Ramadan begins

FROM PAGE 1 Muslims are meant to fast from dawn to dusk during the lunar month. This year, a maximum of 20 people, including the khatibs, imams, hafez, muezzins and khadims, can together attend Tarabi prayers and the five daily prayers in one mosque during the holy month. The statement was part of some instructions issued by the ministry on April 12 in regards to offering prayers at mosques from April 14 till further notice in order to ensure proper health safety measures following the current Covid-19 situation in Bangladesh. Besides, there will be no iftar mahfils and sehris at mosques during the month of Ramadan this year to tackle the second wave of Covid-19 sweeping through the country.

Rush, queues everywhere

FROM PAGE 1 their village homes remain isolated for seven to nine days. "The locals should keep in mind that if anyone in their vicinity is infected, that person will transmit the virus to others," the IGP said. The Cabinet Division on Monday issued a circular with a set of strict restrictions effective from 6:00am on April 14 to April 21 midnight to check the spread of the virus. Several top government officials hinted that the restrictions might be extended if the Covid infection rate and deaths don't come down during the period. As per the circular, all public and private offices will stay closed and all modes of transport will remain suspended. Nobody is allowed to go outdoors unless there is an emergency such as buying medicine and essentials or taking treatment. Banks have been asked to keep certain branches open from 10:00am to 1:00pm on workdays, while trading at the stock market will continue from 10:00am to 12:30pm, said the authorities concerned yesterday. At a press conference at the Rail Bhaban, Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan said the railways will operate special goods trains so that farmers can transport their farm products during the weeklong restrictions. He further said 25 percent concession will be offered on the freight charges. MAD RUSH FOR VILLAGE HOME Thousands were seen leaving the capital for their village homes ahead of the weeklong strict restrictions, posing a fresh risk of Covid-19 transmission.

There was a huge rush of home-bound people at the capital's exit points and ferry terminals yesterday morning. As public transport was unavailable, many were seen crossing the capital's exit points -- Gabtoli, Jatrabari, Abdullahpur, Babu Bazar and Postogola -- on foot. With inter-city bus services suspended, many hired cars or minibuses to go to their village homes, while many others chose to travel by motorbikes. "Since buses are off the road, I have decided to go to my village home on my bike," said Joyjit Dutta who was heading for Cumilla from the capital. The Dhaka-Chattoagram highway saw a huge rush of vehicles, mostly cars, minibuses and goods-laden trucks. Many were seen travelling by pick-ups. The situation was similar on the Dhaka-Tangail highway, the gateway to the northern districts. A total of 31,881 vehicles crossed the Bangabandhu Multipurpose Bridge in 24 hours from 6:00am on Monday to 6:00am on Tuesday. The number was almost double the usual one, said a bridge official. Several hundred vehicles were seen waiting at Paturia ferry terminal in Manikganj for hours to cross the Padma. Thousands of home-goers travelling by cars, minibuses and CNG-run auto-rickshaws were seen heading towards Shimulia ferry terminal in Munshiganj. Besides, people in large numbers were seen leaving the port city of Chattogram ahead of the weeklong restrictions. CROWDS AT MARKETS The capital's kitchen markets, including Kawran Bazar, saw a sudden rise in buyers yesterday evening after the new moon was sighted. Marjina Begum, a buyer at Kawran

Bazar, said she came to the market to buy ifter items as prices of those were low there compared to other markets. Mohammad Gofran, a shop owner at the kitchen market, said the number of buyers went up in the evening and most of them were buying ifter items and sanitizers. Other markets and shops across the city also saw a big rush of customers. There were traffic congestions on major roads in the evening. Though most of the shoppers wore facemasks, the guideline on physical distancing was largely ignored. "I have come to this market to buy a shirt since all shops will remain closed from tomorrow... I really need this," said one of the buyers, Md Sabuj, at Farm View Supermarket in the city's Farm Gate area. Some shop owners kept their outlets open even after 5:00pm, the deadline for closing the shops. Many of them argued that they had to do so because of a huge rush of buyers. At Farm View Supermarket and nearby Shezan Point, shutters of a good number of shops were kept half-open till 6:00pm. Meanwhile, the registrar's office of the Supreme Court issued notifications saying the regular functions of all courts, including the High Court and the SC, will remain suspended for a week from today in line with the government-imposed restrictions. The courts, however, can carry out judicial proceedings virtually on a limited scale during the period. [Our Correspondents in Narayanganj, Cumilla, Munshiganj, Tangail, Pabna, Manikganj and Chattogram contributed to this report]

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