BANGLADESH UPDATE 4,192 New cases in 24hrs | 7,07,362 Total cases | 10,081 Deaths | 5,97,214 Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE 2,992,784 Deaths | 139,456,014 Total cases

CRUCIAL BORO HARVEST

Labourers more available than last year

Some farmers still facing worker shortages

STAR REPORT

Farmers in many areas have started harvesting Boro paddy.

Unlike last year, farmers of most areas are not facing any crisis of labour. Furthermore, many affluent farmers are now using combine harvesters to smoothen their harvesting.

Combine harvester is a versatile machine for reaping, threshing, and winnowing.

Last year, farm labourers faced difficulties going from one place to another as there was a countrywide shutdown due to the pandemic.

However, some farmers said they are not getting required labourers, though agriculture officers said it would not be a major problem.

In Netrakona and Kishoreganj, around 30 percent of paddy in Chhayer Haor, Boali Haor, Pangashyar Haor and Kitonkhola Haor areas have already been harvested.

The harvest, which started towards the end of March, will continue till the end of this month, said Habibur Rahman, agriculture officer in Netrakona's Khaliajury upazila.

Abdus Shakur Saadi, agricultural extension officer in Netrakona's Mohanganj, said as labourers from Sirajganj, Rangpur and Kurigram reached the haor areas around 15 days ago, there is no crisis of labourers.

Besides, combine harvesters are acting as helping hands, he said, adding that a harvester could reap and thresh paddy of an acre of land in an hour.

The paddy is being sold between Tk 850 and Tk 880 a maund, said a 55-year-old Ratan Mia of Magan village in Mohanganj upazila.

The farmer said if proper transportation of paddy to market is ensured, they will get fair prices of their produce.

In Sunamganj and Sylhet, farmers are reaping paddy in a festive atmosphere this year.

As farmers got fair prices of their produce last year, they became interested in cultivating the paddy this year. That is why, this year's Boro production is satisfactory.

There is no crisis of labour this year. Furthermore, many farmers are using combine harvesters. The process of Boo harvesting is going on smoothly, said officials of the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE).

Around 275 combine harvesters are currently being used in Sunamganj and 111 in Sylhet for harvesting Boro.

"I faced an acute shortage of labour during Boro harvesting season. Then, I bought a combine harvester which served me well last year. I'm getting benefit from this machine this year too," said Selim Raza Chowdhury, a farmer of Sukhair Razapur Uttar village in Sunamganj's Dharmapasha.

Farmer Jashim Uddin Talukder of Laksmibaor village in Sunamganj's Chhatak said, "This year's production and labour costs are high. We will face trouble if we don't get fair prices for our produce."

DAE officials said they expected to have produced around 8,85,000 tonnes of paddy this year in Sunamganj and around 3,12,000 tonnes in Sylhet.

Of the paddy, 11 percent has already been harvested in Sunamganj and 21 percent in Sylhet, added the officials.

Contacted, Faridul Hasan, deputy director of Sunamganj DAE, said there was no labour crisis this year. But this year's labour wage was high.

Salah Uddin, deputy director of Sylhet DAE, said along with farm labourers, a large number of tea garden workers have joined the paddy harvest, resulting in no labour crisis.

In Moulvibazar, farmers said they are not getting labourers for reaping paddy in Hakaluki Haor area.

Shafiq Mia, a farmer of Islamganj village in Kulaura upazila, said, "I have cultivated Boro paddy in three acres. I have planned to start harvesting the paddy within next two days. But I am not finding labourers."

Another farmer Sachindra Kumar Das of the area made the similar statement over getting labourers.

"Those who used to work in my farmland are now engaged in sand and stone lifting work. That is why, I am facing severe crisis of labour," he told The Daily Star.

Contacted, Kazi Lutful Bari, deputy director of Moulvibazar DAE, admitted that farmers might not get the required number of labourers. But he claimed it would not make any major problem because farmers could harvest their paddy with the help of combine harvesters.

[Our correspondents from Mymensingh, Sylhet and Moulvibazar contributed to this report.]

35 lakh families

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Later, the Finance Division cross-checked all the names, using multilayer scrutiny and databases, and struck 14.32 lakh names off the list. It finalised the list with 34,97,353 names as beneficiaries.

Talking to this newspaper, a Finance Division official said the allocation of Tk 900 crore has been made from the government's Tk 10,000-crore emergency fund for the pandemic.

The poor and the marginalised people are having a hard time as the entire country has been put under a lockdown for a week starting from Wednesday morning, forcing them to stay indoors.

The strict restrictions are aimed at curbing the rapid rise in virus infections and deaths.

Yesterday, the country hit the grim milestone of 10,000 deaths from Covid-19 with the virus claiming 94 lives in 24 hours till 8:00am.

The government may extend the ongoing restrictions which would severely affect the lives and livelihoods of the poor and the marginalised people.

At a pre-budget meeting with Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal on April 11, economists made various suggestions, including sending money through digital payment methods to the ultra-poor who would face financial hardship during the lockdown.

In her address to the nation on the eve of Pahela Baishakh, the PM stressed that her government is always with the people, and said she had directed the authorities concerned to provide necessary assistance to the poor and low-income people.

OTHER ASSISTANCE

Alongside cash aid to the poor, the government will provide financial assistance to the farmers who suffered loss of Boro crop due to the nor'wester and heatwave that swept the country in the first week of this month.

An estimated 30,000 hectares of Boro crop in both plain and haor areas of several districts were affected, dashing the hopes of a bumper harvest.

To relieve the farmers from the economic distress, the government will give them one-time cash support of Tk 5,000 each. The Finance Division sent a proposal to the Prime Minister's Office last week, primarily allocating Tk 100 crore for an estimated one lakh affected farmers, according to a finance ministry official.

The agriculture ministry has been asked to prepare a list of farmers along with their mobile phone numbers. Once prepared, the Finance Division will start sending money to the mobile banking accounts of the farmers, the official mentioned.

Besides, the finance ministry allocated an additional Tk 800 crore for Test Relief, General Relief (GR), Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), and Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) programmes.

The original allocation for these schemes was Tk 1,216 crore. The main aim of injecting additional funds is to give temporary relief to the rural people facing hardship due to the lockdown.

The Test Relief programme creates employment opportunities for the rural poor through implementation of small rehabilitation projects and provides them with foodgrains in exchange for work. Foodgrains are also distributed among the extremely poor people under the VGF programme.

The Finance Division has asked the disaster management and relief ministry to use its Tk 20-crore disaster fund to provide food assistance to the poor during the lockdown.

The disaster ministry will give the money to district administrations that will prepare food packets containing rice, lentil and oil, and distribute those among the poor and destitute people.

If the ongoing lockdown is extended, around 75,000 tonnes of rice will be sold at a subsidised rate in all 11 cities across the country through Open Market Sale. Rice will be sold at Tk 10 a kg, said a finance ministry official.

"The move will give some cushion to the urban poor," observed the official.

Also, state-run Trading Corporation of Bangladesh will sell essentials at subsidised prices. The finance ministry will give the commerce ministry Tk 100 crore as subsidy for this purpose.

People attend the namaz-e-janaza of Awami League lawmaker and president of Supreme Court Bar Association Abdul Matin Khasru on the capital's SC premises yesterday. Khasru, a former law minister, died at the Combined Military Hospital (CMH) on Wednesday. He had been diagnosed with Covid-19 and was being treated at the hospital in the capital. PHOTO: COLLECTED

Abdul Matin Khasru MP laid to rest

FROM PAGE 1

He was elected lawmaker from Cumilla-5 constituency in 1991, 1996, 2008, 2014 and 2018.

Khasru, a senior lawyer of the Supreme Court, and the newly elected president of Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA), was laid to rest in the family graveyard in his Mirpur village of Cumilla's Brahmanpara upazila yesterday afternoon, Md Mohin Miah, Khasru's personal assistant told The Daily Star.

Earlier in the day, his coffin was kept on the SCBA premises where SC judges, former judges, lawyers, law officers, high-placed government officials, political leaders, educationists, professionals and Khasru's family members paid their last respects.

His namaz-e-janaza was held there.

Chief Justice Syed Mahmud Hossain, Law Minister Anisul Huq, Fisheries and Livestock Minister SM Rezaul Karim, LGRD Minister Md Tajul Islam, judges of the Appellate and High Court Divisions of the SC, Dhaka South City Corporation Mayor Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh, Awami League Joint General Secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif, Attorney General and outgoing SCBA president AM Amin Uddin and its Secretary Md Ruhul Quddus Kazal, among others, joined the janaza and paid tribute to Khasru by placing wreaths.

The chief justice suspended all functions of the Appellate and High Court divisions for yesterday as a show of respect to SCBA president Khasru.

While presiding over a full bench of the Appellate Division for hearing and disposing of cases yesterday morning, the chief justice said, "Being the president of the Supreme Court Bar Association is an honour. Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq was the president of the SCBA. We [judges of the SC] have decided that we will not sit [in the bench to deal with cases] today [yesterday]."

At the beginning of the SC proceedings, Attorney General AM Amin Uddin requested the chief justice to suspend the judicial functions of the SC for the day to pay respect to Khasru.

Khasru left behind his wife, a son and a daughter and a host of admirers and well-wishers to mourn his death.

Khasru, a former law minister, was diagnosed with Covid-19 and admitted to the CMH on March 16.

Born on February 12, 1950, he was elected SCBA president on March 11 this year.

In a statement, Chief Justice Syed Mahmud Hossain said he had a very close relationship with Khasru for around 40 years.

Khasru was a very simple, friendly and temperate soul. He will be remembered for his outstanding role in establishing the rule of law in the country, the chief justice said in the statement.

Law Minister Anisul Huq paid deep respect to Khasru, saying he was a very talented and wise lawyer and a devoted follower of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

A big vacuum has been created in the legal arena following Khasru's death, he said.

He said Khasru had placed the bill for scrapping the black law titled as "Indemnity Ordinance" in parliament in 1996 when he was the state minister for law and cleared the way for holding the trial of the Bangabandhu assassination case.

"While we conducted the Bangabandhu murder case before the courts, Abdul Matin Khasru as the law minister had always accompanied us and provided all assistance and cooperation to us," Anisul Huq, also the then principle state counsel in the Bangabandhu murder case, told The Daily Star on Wednesday.

"Abdul Matin Khasru, who was involved with the politics of Bangladesh Chhatra League, had been elected lawmaker five times," the law minister added.

He served in the first cabinet of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as the minister of law and justice from 1997 to 2001.

Khasru was elected the chairman of the executive committee of Bangladesh Bar Council in 2015.

The following year, he was made the law secretary of AL and also became a presidium member of the party in 2017.

President Abdul Hamid, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Chief Justice Syed Mahmud Hossain, Law Minister Anisul Huq, Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal, Fisheries and Livestock Minister SM Rezaul Karim, Railways Minister M Nurul Islam Sujan, Bangabandhu Sheik Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) Vice-chancellor Professor Dr Md Sharfuddin Ahmed and Peshjibi Samannay Parishad's Organising Secretary Advocate Motaher Hossain Sazu, and other distinguished personalities expressed deep shock at Khasru's demise.

Meanwhile on Wednesday, Prof Shamsuzzaman Khan, former president of Bangla Academy, passed away with Covid-19 infection.

He breathed his last around 2:00pm at BSMMU, confirmed Bangla Academy Public Relations Officer Pias Majid.

He was 81 years old and left behind his wife and three daughters.

Confusion, hassles add to chaos

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increased. There was congestion at several places.

Our correspondents saw five police checkposts between Shanir Akhra and Farmgate. The streets were mostly empty.

Shafiqul Islam, who was travelling on a rickshaw van from from Signboard area to Old Dhaka, said he was going to see his ailing brother.

A correspondent of this newspaper was stopped at Jatrabari and Gulistan checkposts and was allowed to go after showing his identity card.

A police constable in Gulistan area said the number of people on the roads increased on the second day of the lockdown.

In Shahbagh, a Rab-assisted mobile court led by Executive Magistrate Palash Kumar Bosu conducted drives.

Those who did not have the police-issued pass or mention a cause serious enough to be outside were fined. The magistrate also warned people who did not wear masks or did not maintain health rules.

POLICE PASS

According to the PHQ database, 3,46,430 passes were issued from 11:00am on Tuesday to 2:45pm yesterday. The number of visitors to the "movement pass" app was 16,18,29,521, which was 9,946 per minute on an average.

The number of total registrations on the app was 4,87,891 yesterday afternoon, said Farhan Kabir, an assistant superintendent at the PHQ.

He said the "movement pass" was one of the most popular searches on Google in Bangladesh during the period.

"We had no idea the app would get such a response. We have a back-up so that the app can operate smoothly," the ASP said.

If someone has trouble registering, they should refresh the page on the browser, he said.

Sohel Rana, assistant inspector general at the PHQ, said people involved in emergency service just have to show their identity card at checkposts.

The emergency services include hospitals, banks, media, production units, garment factories, utility, phones, internet, postal, government service, law enforcement, fire service and port management, he added.

However, Jiban Ahmed, a photographer of Daily Manabjamin, said police officers at a checkpost in Agargaon fined him Tk 4,000 for being outdoors and not having a drivers' licence even though he was on professional duty.

"I requested them to fine me just for my driver's licence. But they would not hear," Jiban said.

Senior reporter of dhakapost.com Saeed Ripon alleged that he was harassed in Mirpur-1 area while he was reporting.

Ripon said an officer took his phone away and returned it later.

On Wednesday, Nazmul Islam, a doctor at Square Hospital, alleged that he was fined Tk 3,000 while going to his workplace from Munshiganj.

Haider Ali Khan, deputy inspector general at the PHQ, told The Daily Star that those in the emergency services did not need a pass. But they have to show a document from the organisation or an identity card to prove that they actually are involved in an emergency service.

"An emergency worker who is outdoors for non-work related matters will not be allowed to move," said the DIG.

"Many doctors do not have identity cards. In that case, they must get a paper from the hospital they work for and show it to the police," he explained, adding that journalists should also have the ID.

About the allegations of harassment at checkposts, Haider said, "That is not supposed to happen. If we find any deviation, we correct them immediately."

Meanwhile, users complained that they couldn't register for the pass as the site kept telling them that "your number has already been registered".

Many others alleged that the site kept freezing.

"I tried at least 50 times and didn't succeed," said Shafiq Hasan from Dhanmandi.

Vaccine campaign braces

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Serum is yet to get the clearance from the government," Papon said.

Asked when Serum informed them this, Papon said, "Whenever we contact, they say so … Even this week, Serum said this as well. Once Serum gets the clearance, only then we can say what number of vaccine doses we will get. And when we will get it."

Bangladesh signed an agreement with Serum to get three crore doses of vaccine in six installments. The country got the first installment of 50 lakh doses as per schedule, but in the second installment it got only 20 lakh doses in February.

It has not received any vaccine from Serum since then, although the third installment of 50 lakh doses was scheduled to arrive in the last week of March.

In March, India placed a temporary hold on all exports of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine. The Indian government said rising cases meant domestic demand was expected to pick up and so the doses were needed for India's own vaccine rollout.

Adar Poonawalla of Serum told the media early this month that Serum's production capacity to manufacture Covishield is "very stressed, to put it frankly" amid pressure from soaring cases in India.

Meanwhile, Serum has been served a legal notice by AstraZeneca over vaccine supply delays.

When Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) of Bangladesh was asked whether the ongoing vaccination would be hampered under the circumstances, it's director general Prof Abul Bashar Mohammad Khurshid Alam said, "There is a concern over it, but we are trying heart and soul to manage the situation."

The DG also said, "If we don't get the vaccine from Serum soon, then we will try to manage the same vaccine from other sources."

A source in the DGHS said continuing both the first and second dose was a big challenge right now. "We are now concerned whether we can administer the second dose as per our plan. Because we don't have enough vaccines in our hand."

Deaths from Covid-19

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to proportionately increase two weeks after the rise in infection rate.

In late March and early April, the number of detections was on top with frequent new records.

Over the last few days, the number of detections has slightly decreased while the positivity rate has remained stagnant near 20 percent.

"We are observing a higher number of deaths as the infection rate was higher a week ago. As health safety guidelines are in effect now, the transmission and deaths will hopefully decrease in the coming days. If not, there will be the need of a stricter lockdown," Dr Mushtuq Hussain, consultant of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), told The Daily Star recently.

Meanwhile in the last 24 hours, 4,192 new patients tested positive. With this, the total number of confirmed cases rose to 707,362.

Against a total of 19,959 tests in those 24 hours, the positivity rate was 21 percent, which was 18.29 percent against 32,955 tests.

The positivity rate is an important parameter to measure the level of virus transmission.

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 to going down from January. Throughout February, this rate was below three percent but it started rising in early March.

In the same 24 hour period, 5,915 patients recovered from their illnesses, raising the number of recoveries to 5,97,214 -- more than 84 percent of all cases detected so far.

NEWS IN brief

AL supporters are 'fake Muslims'

Says Nurul Haque Nur

Former vice president of Dhaka University Central Students' Union Nurul Haque Nur has called the Awami League supporters as "fake Muslims".

Appearing on a Facebook live on Wednesday, Nur condemned the arrest of his party men and also the Hefajat-e-Islam leaders and activists following the recent countrywide mayhem.

"Awami extremists are spreading hatred against Islamists. They are writing against them on Facebook. They are assassinating their characters … They [Awami League] are not Muslims — they don't have any faith. Please enquire if any of them prays five time daily," said Nur.

100 special flights to take migrants to work

Around 100 special flights will be flown to Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, UAE, and Singapore over a week from tomorrow to take migrant workers to their workplaces.

The government suspended operations of all international flights for a week from April 14 to curb the spread of Covid-19.

Between 20,000 and 25,000 Bangladeshi migrants were supposed to go back to work within the week.

Cut duties

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proposed increasing subsidy for agriculture as well as allocations for modern agriculture.

They also emphasised on timely completion of different government projects and recommended taking stringent steps to avoid waste of public money.

The editors made the call during a virtual pre-budget meeting with Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal.

A finance ministry official said newspaper editors demanded cut in newsprint import duties mentioning that the circulation of newspapers crashed during the pandemic and the newspaper import cost went up.

Currently, newspapers pay 5 percent duty for importing newsprint.

After the meeting, the finance minister at a virtual press briefing said they would later discuss the recommendations in a meeting of the finance ministry team involved in preparing the budget and would try to incorporate the suggestions deemed acceptable in the budget.

Channel i Director and Head of News Shykh Seraj, The Daily Star Editor and Publisher Mahfuz Anam, Editor of Bangladesh Pratidin Naem Nijam, and Nayeemul Islam Khan, editor of daily Amader Orthoneeti, spoke at the meeting, among others.

The minister said Shykh Seraj suggested increasing subsidy for agriculture and stressed the need for food security.

Giving an example of modern farming in high-rises in city areas of different countries, Seraj recommended budgetary allocations so that such a mechanism could be developed in the country, Kamal said.

He said Naem Nizam proposed reducing newsprint import duties and corporate tax on newspapers.

The minister said Nayeemul proposed taking steps for upgrading Dhaka University to an international standard university.

Editors also recommended the finance ministry take strict measures to stop misuse of public money due to delay in implementation of government projects, said Kamal.

Mentioning agriculture as the lifeline of the country, he said the sector would get priority in the budget, likely to be placed in parliament in the first week of June, and the government would do everything to make it more dynamic.

Steps would be taken for use of modern technology in agriculture, said the minister, adding that they were considering stimulus programmes for educated people interested in farming.

Replying to a question, Kamal said prices of rice shot up due to a dearth in the supply following fall in production.

"Be it rice, paddy or wheat, their production depend on the state of nature. We claim ourselves to be self-sufficient in food. We can be self-sufficient in food in a year when the nature's state remains normal," said the minister adding, "We may not maintain it if there is a natural calamity."

A good portion of the Boro crop was damaged in the country last year, he said.

Mentioning that all neighbouring countries, including India, Thailand, faced shortages in agricultural production, the minister said farming was disrupted, which led to supply shortage and price hike.

Bangladesh Bank Governor Fazle Kabir, Finance Secretary Abdur Rouf Talukder, Economic Relations Division Secretary Fatima Yasmin, National Board of Revenue Chairman Abu Hena Md Rahmatul Muneem, Director General of Bangladesh Television Shohrab Hossain, and Bangladesh Betar DG Ahmed Quamruzzaman also attended the meeting.