# Projects hit snags

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appeal, reads a press release sent through its PR agency.

Chattogram-Cox's Bazar Rail Line Construction Project and Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Line-3 Construction Project, among other works, are facing the problems.

The Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (Caab) has suspended all international passenger flights to and from Bangladesh from April 14 to April 20 midnight.

Caab made the decision after the government imposed an eight-day strict restrictions on public movement from April 14 to contain the sharp rise in Covid-19 cases and deaths.

Two flights had been operating on the Bangladesh-China route every week since July last year, sources said.

Although the government enforced the eight-day lockdown, it kept the eight fast-track projects out of its purview. Recently, Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan has said they will not bar contractors from working if they can follow the health safety guidelines.

The CREC said the Padma Bridge Rail Link Project is an important cooperation project between Bangladesh and China. At present, the project is running at a full swing and the project personnel require to travel between China and Bangladesh frequently.

Around 30 people, including the project managers, safety and quality personnel, and technical construction personnel in key positions involved in the projects, need to travel between the two countries every week, reads the press release.

Due to the outbreak, the project management personnel and the on-site labour arrangements have been continuously affected.

And now, the flight suspension policy has even worsened the progress of the projects. If these personnel cannot return to the construction site from China on time, some working procedures are going to be difficult to implement, and some work will even be forced to be suspended, it said.

"This will directly affect the progress of the construction work," it added.

At present, the pandemic situation in China has been effectively controlled. The Chinese personnel who came to Bangladesh were all vaccinated with two shots, and therefore they will not pose any risk of infection to Bangladesh, added the release.

Contacted, Project Director (PD) of the Padma Bridge Rail Line Project Golam Fakhruddin Ahmed Chowdhury also admitted the problem.

He said a group of experts for starting the installation of rail track under the project is supposed to be in Bangladesh, but their arrival is getting delayed due to the flight suspension.

Some 700 Chinese nationals are now working under the project, he said.

The government is implementing the Tk 39,246 crore project to connect the capital with Jashore by 2022 with a 169km rail line over the under-construction Padma bridge.

Another fast track project is the construction of the Chattogram-Cox's Bazar rail line and the CREC is one of the contractors of the CTG-Cox's Bazar rail project.

"The manpower of CREC is not that big in our project. Yes, we are facing a little problem over the issue [suspension of flights], but it is not that big," an official of the project told The Daily Star yesterday.

"However, we are facing problems in bringing construction materials from abroad. We are continuing our work, but it can't be said that we are working in full swing," he said, wishing not to be named.

Some experts required for the Bus Rapid Transit Line-3 were supposed to reach Bangladesh this week, but their arrival got delayed due to suspension of flights, Shafiqul Islam, managing director of Dhaka Bus Rapid Transit Company Limited (DBRTCL), said yesterday.

The government is building a dedicated bus line from Dhaka Airport to Gazipur under the project.

# Khaleda slightly improved

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temperature was persistent the whole day and even in the evening yesterday [Friday].

"But the pattern of her temperature is showing a declining trend as she was free from fever the whole day today [yesterday]. But the temperature has increased a bit in the evening."

He further said, "Considering all aspects, we can say her condition is still stable. If we compare her Friday's level of temperature with Saturday's one, we find a little improvement in her condition. But we should keep in mind that we should not evaluate the whole situation with only a parameter and we should always remain careful. We're handling everything professionally with our medical skills and specialisation."

FM Siddiqui said they found Khaleda's temperature around 100.2°F at about 10:15pm on Saturday.

"We've started giving her the antiviral medicine and she has already received two doses of it. We also think the response to the medicine is positive. We've checked her blood circulation and respiration and these are good. Her [oxygen] saturation level is always persistent between 97 and 98 percent."

Stating that the BNP chief's Covid infection entered nine days on Saturday, he said, she was now passing through a complicated time.

"We'll take necessary steps immediately if we notice any danger signal or deterioration in her condition. As of now, we think everything is all right. But we don't want to show any leniency until two weeks of her infection is passed off and we'll continue to closely monitor her."

Asked whether they have any plan to take Khaleda to any hospital, FM Siddiqui said they still did not think it was necessary.

"But we'll be able to shift her to a hospital quickly in case of any emergency."

The doctor said the condition of some Covid patients deteriorates even after getting discharged from the hospital. "So, we're careful so that no gap is created anywhere regarding her treatment."

Asked about the BNP Chief's mental health, he said, she was mentally very strong and she urged all to wear masks to protect them from the virus infection.

FM Siddiqui said Khaleda's lung condition seemed to be in a good shape as her oxygen level was not dropping.

About her CT scan test report, he said, her infection was very nominal.

The BNP chief underwent the Covid test on Saturday last as eight other people of her residence were infected with the virus and her report came out positive.

Amid the coronavirus outbreak, the government freed Khaleda Zia from jail for six months through an executive order, suspending her sentences on March 25 last year.

Later, the government extended her release twice.

# Bangalees claim Calcutta

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officially declared the creation of the new Bangalee nation.

He issued a 1,600-word statement, recounting how the Pakistani government had flouted the clear verdict of a democratic election in Bangladesh and engaged itself in "a planned attempt to subdue and crush the entire Bangalee nation".

Hossain Ali further said that more than 50 of the approximately 80 members of the mission were Bangalees. He said the 30 West Pakistanis would not be kept in the mission and that any of them "who wish to return to West Pakistan will be allowed to do so without hindrance and at the earliest opportunity."

It is also reported that the entire money in the credit of the Pakistan Deputy High Commission in a Calcutta bank was withdrawn on April 17. The measure had the approval of all senior members of the mission.

**MUJIB MOVED**

Associated Press reported today that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the imprisoned leader of Bangladesh Liberation Movement, had been taken to another jail after treatment in the Combined Military Hospital in Rawalpindi. Bangabandhu was now at a prison at Mianwali, informed the news agency. But according to Government informants, Sheikh Mujib was on a hunger strike.

**PURGE OF BANGALEES FROM PAKISTAN CIVIL SERVICE**

A purge of Bangalees from the Pakistan armed forces and key Civil Service posts was reported under way. It is reported that the aim was to remove "unreliable elements" from every aspect of the government's drive against the independence seeking Bangalees. Hundreds of Bangalee servicemen in West Pakistan had been sent on leave but had been forbidden to return to their homes in the eastern province. It is further reported that the 20 Bangalee civil servants had either lost their jobs or been given lesser positions.

**INDONESIA WILL NOT RECOGNISE BANGLADESH**

Indonesia would not recognize Bangladesh because it didn't want to see other people's country split, told Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik today. He reaffirmed that Indonesia regarded the Pakistani crisis as the internal affair of the country, and no outsiders had the right to interfere.

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# ACC opens probe into BTCL graft

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DWDM is an automated optical multiplexing technology to increase bandwidth over existing fibre networks.

A committee formed on June 10 set the estimated cost at Tk 34.13 crore and an international tender was called on December 12, 2019. Five companies took part in the bidding.

Tech Valley offered Tk 27.10 crore, Huawei Technologies Tk 20.73 crore, Uhan Fiberhome Tk 26.26 crore, X-Fer Tk 31.33 crore, and ZTE Corporation Tk 37.40 crore.

BTCL's seven-member tender evaluation committee unanimously found four companies disqualified and X-Fer's offer the only responsive bid with an evaluated price that is 8.716 percent lower than the official estimate.

The committee included three of BTCL's deputy managing directors, one of them being the chairman; the project director as the member secretary, and an official from the telecom ministry.

Prof Dr Kauser Alam and Lt Colonel Rashedul Islam joined as external members, representing Buet and Bangladesh Army respectively.

The tender evaluation report recommended X-Fer and it got signatures by the member secretary and both the external members.

But BTCL's deputy managing directors Md Rafiqul Islam, AKM Habibur Rahman, Khandaker Jubayer Hasan and Deputy Secretary of the Telecom Ministry ABM Badiuzzaman refrained from signing the report.

They rather disagreed with the recommendation and opined for a re-tender.

Their reasoning was that the qualified bidder's price is higher than that of the disqualified ones, despite admitting that there is no scope for comparing the price of the disqualified bidders with that of the winner as per the law.

They made handwritten changes to several page numbers of the printed report and inserted additional two pages containing their dissenting opinion beyond the knowledge of the members who signed it.

The Daily Star learnt all this from ACC documents, tender-related papers of the BTCL project and a complaint filed by a government agency with the anti-graft body.

Concealing the doctored evaluation report, a separate working paper was presented to the BTCL board.

The 11-member board includes five ministry officials besides the posts and telecommunication secretary and the BTCL MD. The remaining four are external members.

In the 176th board meeting, the ministry officials and the BTCL boss supported re-tender, while the external members were against it as it was beyond the ambit of the law.

The external members raised their eyebrows as the tender evaluation report was not made available at the meeting. The board decided to discuss the matter at the next meeting.

Still, without the evaluation report, the 177th board meeting, held virtually, decided to call for a re-tender. Two external members vetoed in writing.

Of the other two external members, the FBCCI representative who participated in the previous meeting was denied access to the Zoom video-conferencing system on the pretext that he was abroad.

The Buet representative was shown, in the meeting minutes, in favour of the re-tender as he did not disagree in writing.

AKM Fazlul Karim, founding director general and now adviser of the Central Procurement Technical Unit (CPTU) of the government, told the Daily Star, "There is no provision in the Public Procurement Act [PPA] or the Public Procurement Rules [PPR] that allows consideration of the non-responsive bid that failed to meet the qualification criterion or technical specification."

The rules have made it mandatory to evaluate and compare only the responsive bids, he said.

"The evaluation committee has no choice other than to compare the lowest evaluated price with the official estimate. Comparing non-responsive bids with the lowest one is not permitted," he added.

"Opining for re-tender based on disqualified bidder's price means that they deliberately defied the law despite being aware of it."

Replying to queries of this correspondent, he further said there is no provision in PPA or PPR that allows arbitrary cancellation of tender. The authorities may cancel a tender under certain circumstances specified in the law.

The BTCL tender was cancelled on July 23 last year, and X-Fer was notified 24 days later instead of seven days as specified in the law.

The qualified bidder went to the review panel of the CPTU, an agency responsible for managing procurement by government bodies.

BTCL admitted to the review panel that the procurement rules were not taken into consideration while cancelling the tender.

Interestingly, the review panel recommended action against the project director along with officials who prepared the cost estimate, citing the petitioner's complaint, but at the same time rejected the complaint.

According to documents, a committee formed following approval by the MD of BTCL prepared the official cost estimate. The MD approved it and kept it sealed.

The project director neither prepared nor approved any estimate. The petitioner had also no complaint about the estimate.

Recommending punishment to anyone who has no role in estimate preparation or approval is never expected, Fazlul Karim said.

**RE-TENDER**

Still, BTCL went for re-tender on September 13, 2020, even before the review panel made its decision on October 8.

X-Fer then filed a writ with the High Court, challenging the decision of the review panel and seeking cancellation of the re-tender and directive to accept their bid.

On October 12, 2020, a High Court bench summarily rejected the writ without issuing any rule.

X-Fer Ltd then moved the Supreme Court, which is scheduled to hold a hearing on the matter today.

For the re-tender, a new evaluation committee was formed excluding the external members of Buet and the Army without informing them. New members were chosen from the Bangladesh Tariff Commission and the Power Grid Corporation of Bangladesh.

Under the re-tender, the new committee recommended awarding the work to ZTE Corporation although its price was found to be inconsistent.

The evaluation committee was headed by the project director of BTCL's MOTN project, which is being implemented by a Chinese firm which participated in the bidding, creating a conflict of interest.

The BTCL board, chaired by the new secretary of the post and telecommunication division, did not accept the recommendation and ordered the cancellation of the re-tender.

Again a second re-tender was floated on February 22 this year and it closed on April 7.

Contacted, BTCL Managing Director Rafiqul Matin said, "The tender has been renewed. There were no irregularities in the tender process of the project."

When asked about the inquiry of the ACC, Posts and Telecommunication Minister Mustafa Jabbar said nobody would be spared if any corruption allegation is proven.

Afzal Hossain, the new secretary of the posts and telecom division, refrained from making any comment.

Of the four officials being investigated by the ACC, Nur-ur-Rahman, Mohsinul Alam and Md Moslehuddin could not be reached for comments.

# Axed flights leave migrants in the lurch

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they had to spend a huge amount of money to reach Dhaka from different districts amid the countrywide "strict lockdown".

They also said Biman should have informed them well in advance about the flight cancellations.

Migrant workers blamed a lack of coordination between Biman and other authorities concerned and a lack of "sincerity" of the national flag carrier for their sufferings.

The Biman MD and Civil Aviation Secretary Mokammel Hossain, however, denied the allegations.

Speaking to reporters after an inter-ministerial meeting at the Dhaka airport, they said the Saudi authorities did not grant Biman flights landing permissions at the last moment.

"We tried to contact our valued passengers by calling them to inform about cancellation of flights. But we couldn't contact those passengers who bought tickets through travel agents as they didn't respond to our calls," said Biman MD Mostafa Kamal.

**PASSENGERS SUFFER**

Sohrab Hossain, a migrant worker from Dinajpur, said he spent Tk 26,000 to rent a microbus for a trip to the capital to catch the Saudi-bound Biman flight which was scheduled to depart Dhaka at 6:15am yesterday.

Monsur Ahmed, another expatriate worker from Chandpur, said: "After enduring sufferings, I only came to know that my flight was cancelled. I am not sure when I will be able to return to Saudi Arabia."

Worried about returning to the Gulf country, Md Akhtar said his visa would expire on April 20. Several other migrant workers also said their visas would expire next week.

Expressing deep disappointment over the cancellation of his flight, Shahin Ahmed from Brahmanbaria's Nabinagar said he came home four months ago. He had to borrow Tk 4 lakh to bear family expenses, buy an air ticket and meet other expenses to go to Saudi Arabia.

"I obtained the visa after a long processing delay. I was scheduled to return to work tonight [last night]. All my dreams will be shattered if I fail to go to Saudi Arabia on time," he said.

According to Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (Baira) and Association of Travel Agents of Bangladesh (Atab), about 20,000 to 25,000 migrant workers were supposed to return to work abroad in a week starting from April 14.

The government on April 14 suspended operation of all international passenger flights to and from Bangladesh for a week to contain the spread of Covid-19.

However, the authorities the following day decided to operate at least 100 special flights to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Oman and Singapore in a week from yesterday so that several thousand migrant workers can return to work.

Officials said at least four flights of three airlines left Dhaka for Dubai and Saudi Arabia yesterday and early today carrying expatriate workers.

Asked about the sufferings of passengers, Ahmed Munirus Saleheen, secretary to the expatriates welfare and overseas employment ministry, told reporters that the government would seriously look into the matter and discuss with the Saudi authorities extending the validity of visas and Iqamas (work permit) of those Bangladeshis whose visas and Iqamas would expire.

After the inter-ministerial meeting at the airport, the civil aviation secretary called upon migrant workers not to misunderstand them saying there was no lack of sincerity on their part to resolve the flight cancellation issue.

He also said all Biman passengers who failed to go to Saudi Arabia due to cancellation of flights were taken to a city hotel.

Air Vice Marshal M Mafidur Rahman, chairman of Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh, told reporters that they would look into whether there was any lack of sincerity on Biman's part to ensure operating its flights to Saudi Arabia.

**PROTESTS BEFORE SAUDIA OFFICE**

Meanwhile, several hundred migrant workers yesterday staged a protest in front of Saudi Arabian Airlines office at Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel in the capital demanding the airliner start operating flights to Saudi Arabia.

Saudia was supposed to start operating special flights from yesterday.

Witnesses said expatriate workers started arriving in front of the Saudia office since early morning. They blocked a road near Karwan Bazar intersection around 11:30am, halting traffic on the road for about an hour.

Raushan Ara, a migrant worker, said she spent Tk 25,000 to travel to the capital from Nilphamari by a microbus to catch a Saudia flight scheduled for departing Dhaka last night.

She said her visa would expire last night if she failed to return to Riyadh.

The demonstrators left the area around 2:00pm after Saudia officials assured them of operating special flights from today.

# Covid death toll passes 3 million

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slump, the Indian government is desperate to avoid a second stoppage. But Delhi joined Mumbai in ordering all but essential services to close.

The city of more than 20 million people now has the most daily cases in India and restaurants, malls and gyms were all closed. Weddings can go ahead with guests limited to 50 people, while only 20 can attend funerals.

Maharashtra, which includes Mumbai, Gujarat and IT hub Bangalore's home state Karnataka have also imposed restrictions on movement.

Uttar Pradesh state, home to some 240 million people, has ordered a one-day lockdown today.

Similarly, the northern state of Uttarakhand has restricted gatherings to 200 people -- but exempted the huge Hindu Kumbh Mela festival. The gathering in Haridwar has attracted up to 25 million people since January, including some 4.6 million this week alone, with most people ignoring Covid-19 guidelines.

More than 1,600 people tested positive for coronavirus in Haridwar in barely three days this week and experts fear that many devotees will take the virus back to their home towns and villages.

The latest round of voting also went ahead in the West Bengal state election with long queues forming outside polling stations. Rival parties have been holding huge rallies in recent weeks again fuelling super-spreader fears.

Hopes that South Asian countries might have seen the worst of the pandemic have been dashed, with India recording over two million new cases this month alone and Bangladesh and Pakistan imposing new shutdowns.

Udaya Regmi of the international Red Cross said the "truly frightening" South Asian surge was a "wake-up call to the world".

"Vaccines must be available to everyone, everywhere, rich and poor to overcome this terrible pandemic," Regmi added.

# 44pc Covid

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was 638 in March but in the first 15 days of April it was 941.

Analysing the deaths, it found that 52 percent hospitalised patients, who had died, died within five days of infection and 26 percent within 10 days of infection.

"The Covid-19 patients are dying quickly," the report said.

Noted epidemiologist Mushtaq said the other worrying matter is the rising number of women dying in the second wave.

Many hospitals are at capacity and some are on the verge of being overrun.

# Some of BNP

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The BNP demonstrated multiple times and observed a countrywide hartal over the "enforced disappearance".

Ilias' wife Tahmina Rushdir Luna on April 19, 2012, filed a writ petition with the High Court claiming that law enforcers illegally kept her husband in detention. She sought HC orders on them to bring her husband before the court.

Abbas yesterday said, "Former MP M Ilyas Ali was an independent, patriotic and courageous leader. The secretary general [Fakhrul] of our party is present here [at the virtual meeting], I would like to tell him, please make arrangements to identify the scoundrels of our party who were behind the disappearance of Ilias. Many people know them.

"The night before he fell victim to enforced disappearance, Ilias had a disagreement with one person at the party office. Ilias rebuked him a lot. Those poisonous snakes are still in our party. If we can't get them out of the party, we won't be able to move forward under any circumstances."

Abbas, also former mayor of Dhaka City Corporation, said, "I got the news between 1:30am and 1:45am that night -- Ilias was a victim of enforced disappearance. I immediately contacted the officials I knew and they informed me that he was being taken to Chattogram.

"The most interesting thing is that the police officers who were there when he [Ilias] was taken, have not been found yet. You [BNP leaders present at the meeting] do not know about this. The police officers who were in the car have not been found as of today. The driver of Ilias's car has also not been found. So, who did this?

"... I assumed that the Awami League government was not involved in the disappearance of Ilias Ali. Who was involved in the disappearance then?"

Former vice-president of Juba Dal Qaiyum Chowdhury presided over the discussion while Fakhrul and other BNP leaders including AZM Zahid Hossain, Shamsuzzaman Dudu, Asaduzzaman Ripon, Khairul Kabir Khokon, Fazlul Haque Milon, and Zahiruddin Swapan took part in the discussion.

Following the writ petition in 2012, the HC issued a rule asking law enforcement agencies to explain in 10 days as to why they should not be directed to produce Ilias before the court or prove that he was not being detained by them.

The HC is yet to start hearing on the rule. Neither the petitioner nor the state has taken any initiative in this regard.

Five law enforcement agencies submitted reports to the HC claiming that Ilias was not in their custody and they did not pick him up or detain him, said sources at the attorney general's office.

# Nasa's InSight

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Unfortunately, not all has gone to plan. Despite InSight landing in Elysium Planitia, a windswept area of Mars that gets lots of sunlight, none of the passing dust devils (funnel-like chimneys of hot air) have been close enough to clean the panels.

This means that InSight is only getting 27 per cent of the power that it otherwise would – shared between its scientific instruments, robotic arm, radio, and heaters.

To make matters worse, the windiest Martian season has just ended and it could be months before another cleaning event naturally occurs, and Mars is moving away from the Sun. Its already weak energy is getting weaker, and when InSight needs it most, and science operations have had to be put on hold until July 2021 when Mars is closer to the star.

"The amount of power available over the next few months will really be driven by the weather," said InSight's project manager, Chuck Scott of Nasa's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Southern California.

"As part of our extended-mission planning, we developed an operations strategy to keep InSight safe through the winter so that we can resume science operations as solar intensity increases."

Nasa scientists now find themselves in the unenviable position of having to choose which instruments need to be switched off each day to conserve necessary power for the heaters and radio communication.

The craft's weather monitoring will be off most days, meaning that Nasa will get less frequent updates about its environment, but Nasa hopes that even if the craft did go offline due to a lack of power that it would be able to reboot when the sunlight returns.

Before that, there is some recourse the agency can take to try and spark the lander into life. InSight will move its robotic arm, equipped with a camera, closer to the panels to better image the dust coating later this week.