

BANGLADESH UPDATE

3,698
New cases in 24hrs

7,18,950
Total cases

10,385
Deaths

6,14,936
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

3,027,454
Deaths

141,606,426
Total cases

PANDEMIC ASSISTANCE

PM to give aid to 36 lakh families

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will provide financial assistance to some 36 lakh families who have been hit hard by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and recent natural disasters.

The 36 families include 35 lakh low-income ones engaged in different occupations but hit hard by the current coronavirus situation and the rest one lakh are farmers affected by recent natural disasters.

Tk 2,500 will be provided as cash support to 35 lakh families, while Tk 5,000 will be given to one lakh farmer families each, said PM's Press Secretary Ihsanul Karim.

The government will spend a total of Tk 930 crore to disburse cash among some 36 lakh families as the allocation for Covid-hit low-income families is Tk 880 crore and for disaster-affected farmers is Tk 50 crore.

Out of 3,094,249 hectares of cropland in 36 districts, 10,301 hectares of cropland was destroyed and 59,327 hectares of cropland was partially damaged due to strong winds, hailstorms, and cyclones on April 4, 2021.

Some 100,000 farmers were directly affected due to the recent disaster, according to the data of the Department of Agricultural Extension.



In this context, the Ministry of Agriculture has recommended providing Tk 5,000 to each farmer as they are affected by double blows -- natural calamity and Covid-19 pandemic.

The ministry has already started enlisting the one lakh farmers incorporating their names, national identity card number, and mobile number in the list. The actual allocation for the farmers can be more or less depending on the number of farmers in the final list.

In the 2019-20 fiscal year, the government disbursed Tk 2,500 as cash aid to each 35 lakh families scrutinising a list of 50 lakh families hit hard by the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. The allocation for providing cash support to the poor families was Tk 1,257.50 crore.

The prime minister, in May 2020, inaugurated the disbursement of cash support through G2P (Government-to-Person) through mobile financial services (MFSs).

In the wake of the 2nd wave of coronavirus, the government has been enforcing Covid-19 lockdown since April 14 to prevent the spread of the virus.

In this context, the ministry concerned recommended providing Tk 2,500 as cash aid to each 35 lakh family this time.



People carrying the body of a deceased Covid-19 patient towards Block-8 of the Rayerbazar Graveyard in the capital yesterday afternoon. The block has been designated for burial of Covid-19 patients.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUJON

Quest for better conditions met with bullets

FROM PAGE 1

and emitting a rancid smell. The tap at the labour shed was also found devoid of water on Saturday evening.

Rafique Uddin, a worker from Kurigram district, told The Daily Star that they were forced to live in cramped rooms, use overflowing unhygienic toilets while facing lack of clean water.

Apart from resolving these problems, they demanded a rise in per-hour wages and that arrears be paid, said Arif Billah, another worker at the plant.

The problems could easily be solved through discussion and dialogue but our demands were met with bullets, he added.

Md Rafique, one of the workers at the power plant, told The Daily Star that more or less every worker faces problems with toilets, accommodation and water supply under 27 contractors at the plant. But workers under Zan Zejan, a Chinese company, faces problems beyond these issues.

Shahedul Karim Raju, a worker at the plant, told The Daily Star over phone that the problem started with workers under Zan Zejan and later spread to others.

"Workers of Zan Zejan forced us to stop work on Friday. As we also have some problems we wanted an end to our crisis. That's why we went to meet the authorities of the Chinese company on Saturday morning."

Raju also said locals might have played a role in instigating workers.

Mohammed Ansar, a member of Gondamara union parishad where the plant is located, told The Daily Star that Md Baizid, manager of Mahi Enterprise which works under Zan Zejan, used to rough up workers and deprived them of salaries, which led to the unrest.

Baizid could not be reached for comment.

Mohammed Liakot Ali, chairman of Gondamara union parishad, told The Daily Star there were some locals, who despite doing well, worked at the power plant as labourers.

"Police must look into such recruitment to see why they work and what their function inside the plant is," he said.

He claimed that the discontent has been in the making for the last three months. Some 30 locals fuelled the discontent. If the authorities investigate the matter rising above party lines, the key culprit will be easy to net, he said.

Two cases were filed against a total of 3,562 people with Banshkhal Police Station in connection with Saturday's clash.

Police filed one of the cases accusing 2,500 unidentified persons on charge of attacking law enforcers while the power plant authorities have filed the other case accusing 22 named and 1,040 unnamed persons for setting vehicles on fire during the incident, Shafiq Kabir, officer-in-charge (OC) of Banshkhal Police Station, told The Daily Star.

Sub-inspector of Banshkhal Police Station Rashed and Chief Coordinator of the plant Faruk Ahmed filed the cases respectively, the OC said.

No one was arrested in connection with the cases till the filing of the report.

When asked about the necessity of indiscriminate firing towards workers, Chattogram District Superintendent of Police (SP) SM Rashidul Haque told The Daily Star, "Around 2,500 to 3,000 workers gathered and tried to attack the Chinese workers of the project. They even assaulted their fellow workers and police personnel and set several project properties on fire."

"As they attacked police and considering the circumstances, police opened fire to save the Chinese workers and property, and that led to the casualties," the SP said.

"If there is any police negligence, action will be taken after investigation. We've formed a probe committee and the report will make it clear," SP SM Rashidul Haque said.

Local sources at Banshkhal's Gandamara said workers -- fearing harassment and further violence -- were

seen leaving the area since yesterday evening.

ASK URGES GOVT FOR LEGAL ACTION

Ain O Salih Kendra (ASK), a leading rights organisation, yesterday served a legal notice on the government requesting it to take appropriate legal action against those involved in killing and injuring workers of the SS Power I Plant.

In the notice, the organisation urged authorities concerned of the government to give Tk 3 crore in compensation to the family of each of the workers who were killed and Tk 2 crore to the family of each worker injured in the clash within seven days by ensuring their safety and security.

ASK in the notice requested authorities to file a criminal case against the perpetrators (be they the employers, administration or law enforcement agencies or any vested quarter) involved in the incident of killing and injuring workers, bringing charges of murder and grievous hurt against them under the relevant law.

The organisation also asked officials concerned of the government to withdraw the case filed against workers in seven days, saying the officials' prompt action is highly necessary to protect workers' right to life, property, livelihood and security.

Lawyer Syeda Nasrin sent the legal notice on behalf of ASK to the officials concerned saying that a writ petition will be filed with the High Court seeking necessary orders if the officials failed to take appropriate action in line with the demand of the legal notice.

The notice was sent to senior secretary and secretary to home ministry; secretaries to the ministries of law, industries, labour and employment, commerce and power, energy and mineral resources; inspector general of police; divisional commissioner, deputy commissioner and superintendent of police in Chattogram for taking appropriate action, Shahinuzzaman Shahin, another lawyer for ASK, told The Daily Star.

STRANDED MIGRANTS

Lucky ones get to go to work abroad

Seven of 12 special flights depart

RASHIDUL HASAN

Seven out of 12 scheduled special flights left the Dhaka airport as of 9:00pm yesterday.

Of the seven flights, Biman Bangladesh Airlines operated two flights, one each on Dammam and Riyadh route; Oman Air operated one flight to Muscat; US-Bangla Airlines operated three flights, one each to Doha, Dubai, and Muscat; and Emirates operated one flight to Dubai, Group Captain AHM Touhidul Ahsan, director, Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA), told The Daily Star.

Amid the nationwide lockdown that has been imposed to prevent the spread of coronavirus, around 1,600 expatriate workers remained stuck and could not return to their workplaces in Saudi Arabia, Muscat, Dubai, and Doha on these flights, sources at the HSIA said.

Director, HSIA, said there was no report so far about the cancellation of any of the 12 special flights scheduled to fly yesterday from Dhaka.

Meanwhile, several hundred migrant workers also gathered in front of the Biman's Motijheel office in the capital and Saudi Arabian Airlines' office at the city's Hotel Sonargaon yesterday for the second consecutive days to re-issue their return tickets to their workplaces in different countries.

Talking to The Daily Star, in front of Saudia, several migrant workers told this correspondent that their visas would be expired within the next three to four days if they fail to go to their workplaces in Saudi Arabia.

Due to the chaotic situation,

among the several hundred expatriate workers in front of Biman's Motijheel office, a migrant worker suffered a serious injury in his chest and face as he fell on a glass door at the entrance of the office building.

He was rushed to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Staging demonstrations in front of the Biman office, many passengers said they had to face untold sufferings and had to spend a huge amount of money to reach Dhaka from different districts amid the countrywide "strict lockdown".

"But after reaching here, we are not getting information from the Biman officials when we will be able to re-issue our return ticket," Tajuddin Ahmed, a migrant worker hailed from Kanaighat, Sylhet, told The Daily Star. Aminuddin, another Saudi-bound migrant worker, said he would be put in serious problems if he fails to go to Saudi Arabia by April 21, the deadline for his visa expiry.

The return of several thousand Bangladeshi expatriate workers to their workplaces abroad, particularly in Saudi Arabia, suffered a major blow on Saturday due to the cancellation of eight flights from Dhaka.

The government on April 14 suspended the 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 Saturday so that several thousand migrant workers can return to work.

Line of corpses only gets

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Meanwhile, graveyard staffers said they have been struggling to perform the burials while maintaining health guidelines due to a lack of personal protective equipment, gloves and sanitisers.

"We had received protective equipment last year to perform burials. But this year, we are yet to get any. We are having to do our job without maintaining health guidelines properly, ultimately risking our lives," said Shaikul Islam, who has been working in the graveyard for the last three years.

"We are worried because there is a surge in Covid-19 infections and deaths in the country," he said, adding that at least six people are needed to carry out just one burial.

Prof Sultana Shahana Banu, head of the virology department at Dhaka Medical College, said wearing PPEs and other protective gear is a must while burying a Covid-19-infected body.

"Although the virus cannot spread from a corpse but risks remain since after a person's death, the body can carry the virus for several hours," she said.

The Rayerbazar graveyard, established on about 80 acres of land in Mohammadpur area, is the largest

graveyard in Dhaka, run under the DNCC.

Contacted, Md Asaduzzaman, DNCC social welfare officer, said burials of Covid-19-infected bodies increased recently.

Some 11 such bodies were buried there on Tuesday and another 12 on Wednesday, he said.

Five bodies were buried at the graveyard as of 3:00pm yesterday, he said, adding that the arrival of bodies usually increases after the evenings.

So far, around 1,100 Covid-19-infected bodies have been buried at the graveyard since people started to die from the infection last year, he added.

However, Asaduzzaman said, "Some people may be burying the deceased secretly in other graveyards in the city. Besides, many are taking the bodies to their village homes in different districts."

Staffers said the graveyard's block-8 has been dedicated for the burial of Covid-19 patients and it still has enough space left.

They added that although they charge Tk 500 for one burial, no amount is charged for the burial of Covid-19 bodies.

Some 32 people work in two shifts at the graveyard.

Extended lockdown to be stricter

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Tomorrow's [today] meeting of secretaries may make the decision," Agriculture Minister Abdur Razzak told The Daily Star.

The country went through the 14th day of restrictions yesterday, when the highest, 102 confirmed deaths due to Covid-19, was reported.

Although all public and private offices remained shuttered and public transport suspended, emergency services, factories, and a few branches of banks continued their operations.

While the main streets have been relatively empty, the alleys remained crowded as many shops other than those selling groceries and drugs remained open with half-closed shutters.

"In the given situation, the government is considering... implementing the restrictions through stricter measures," a senior cabinet

division official told The Daily Star yesterday, wishing not to be named.

However, an "inner circle" within the government is discussing the likelihood of the restrictions being extended until after the Eid.

Throughout the current restrictions, the presence of law enforcers were visible on the main streets in the city and beyond, but very few of them were seen in alleyways.

"The alleys would be brought under stricter vigilance," the cabinet division official said, adding that all these decisions depended on the prime minister's approval.

On April 4, the Cabinet Division issued an 11-point directive with a set of restrictions effective from 6:00am on April 5 to 12:00am on April 11 to contain the spread of coronavirus. It said violators of the directives would be punished.

Different offices, mills and factories

were exempt from the restrictions and the government allowed resumption of bus services within the 11 cities from April 7.

On April 8, the government announced that shops and malls could be open for eight hours from April 9 to April 13 despite concerns from health experts.

Large numbers of people were seen on the streets buying goods and going to offices and businesses. Many began hanging out at tea-stalls in their neighbourhoods. Very few steps were taken to enforce the restrictions.

The government later extended the restrictions until 6:00am on April 14.

As the experts doubted whether the half-hearted enforcement of restrictions would be effective at all, the cabinet division on April 12 issued a circular regarding a "strict lockdown" from 6:00am on April 14 to April 21 midnight.

Dhaka hotter in 20 years

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the smaller cities," the report said. The annual daytime temperature in Chattogram has risen by 1.92 degrees Celsius, in Khulna by 1.27 degrees, in Sylhet by 1.10 degrees and in Rajshahi by 0.74 degrees, according to the report.

When it comes to night temperatures, Chattogram scored highest with a 1.90 degrees Celsius increase, followed by Dhaka with 1.57 degrees.

The lowest night temperature increase was observed in Sylhet city (0.16 degrees Celsius).

"Human populations play a major role in shaping cities and influencing the thermal environment of urban areas, so increasing population both expand city size and are accountable for the rapid transformation of natural land cover to impervious surfaces," the report found.

"The situation is going from bad to worse. Poor environmental governance is accountable for temperatures rising at an alarming rate," Ashraf Dewan, lead researcher of the study, told The Daily Star.

He also said urban warming is increasing at an alarming rate in Bangladesh cities due to a variety of reasons including uneven building heights, extreme population density, meagre greenery, and above all, poor environmental governance.

"While buildings trap daytime heating and reduce nighttime cooling as a result of multiple reflection,

if building height is more than the surrounding trees then these buildings will absorb heat and contribute to the urban heat island (UHI) effect.

"UHI are high in areas where highrise buildings are concentrated. Highrise buildings need more energy consuming mechanical gadgets (air conditioners, lifts, etc.) to operate, which generate more heat," he said.

Rahman also pointed at filling up of water bodies. Water bodies play a major role in controlling microclimates through controlling microclimate humidity and temperature.

The other reason the urban planner cited was high building density, which hampers natural ventilation in buildings and contributes to the UHI effect.

He said the UHI phenomenon affects human welfare in terms of living conditions, especially for children and the older people.

Rahman, who was coordinator and deputy team leader, Detailed Area Plan, said in the DAP there were new guidelines for urban density control through regulating residential buildings' height and density.

"Restoration of khals (canals or creeks), rivers, wetlands and roads and railways as urban lifeline is important. These urban lifelines are designed as public health infrastructure," he said, urging the creation of a green-blue network criss-crossing the Dhaka metropolitan region.

OXYGEN SHORTAGE IN COVID

India bans oxygen supply for industrial purposes

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Delhi

Faced with a shortage of oxygen supply to treat an unprecedented rise in critical Covid-19 patients across India, its government last night decided to ban the supply of oxygen for industrial purposes from April 22 till further order.

"... the supply of oxygen for industrial purposes by manufacturers and suppliers is prohibited forthwith from 22.04.2021 till further orders," the health ministry said in a statement.

The matter was deliberated by the commerce ministry with all stakeholders and "after due deliberations, it was considered prudent to restrict the industrial usage of oxygen to meet the rising demand for medical oxygen," according to the ministry.

"The surplus oxygen available as a result of this temporary restriction will facilitate its freeing up for use as medical oxygen for treatment of Covid-19 patients," it said.

India is facing an unprecedented surge in new daily cases of Covid-19 and the requirement of oxygen for effective clinical treatment of patients has also witnessed a manifold increase.

As per the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) under India's commerce ministry, the requirement of oxygen for Covid-19 treatment has already reached about 60 percent of the total daily oxygen production and is expected to rise further.

In another move to boost the supply of oxygen for treatment of Covid-19 patients in different parts of the country, the railways ministry is gearing up to transport liquid medical oxygen and oxygen cylinders and to run special trains called "Oxygen Express".

To facilitate easy and smooth transport of oxygen by freight trains across the country, a green corridor is being created for fast movement of "Oxygen Express" trains.

The prohibition on oxygen for industrial use will, however, not apply to the supply of oxygen for production of ampoules and vials, pharmaceutical industries, petroleum refineries, steel plants, nuclear energy facilities, oxygen cylinder manufacturers, waste water treatment plants, food and water purification and process industries which require uninterrupted operation of furnaces.

CASE UNDER DSA

Man held over FB post in Khagrachhari

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bandarban

A young man in Khagrachhari landed in jail yesterday in a case filed under the Digital Security Act over his Facebook comments.

Amit Acharjee, 29, was arrested around 11:30am, soon after local resident Ibrahim Kalil filed a case accusing Amit of "hurting religious sentiment on Facebook".

"He is accused of making provocative comments on a video of Islamist speaker Mizanur Rahman Azhari on Facebook. This spread tension on [sic] Facebook, prompting Amit to leave his house and go into hiding in the Bottoli area," said Inspector Golam Afsar of Khagrachhari Sadar Police Station.

He added that Amit was arrested from there and a court sent him to jail later.

Record 102 die

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At least 6,121 Covid-19 patients recovered during the period.

The total number of recoveries is now 6,14,936 and the recovery rate is 85.53 percent.

Among yesterday's 102 deceased, 59 were men and 43 women. Of them, two were within 31-40 years old, 14 between 41 and 50, 23 within 51-60, and 63 were above 60 years old, added the release.

Gaza sees record daily virus deaths

AFP, Gaza City

The Gaza Strip recorded its highest-ever daily toll of coronavirus deaths, authorities said Sunday, as the Israeli-blockaded territory struggles with a dearth of vaccines.

The Palestinian enclave, hemmed in by a large concrete barrier, the Egyptian border and the Mediterranean Sea, had been largely spared by the Covid-19 illness for much of last year.