

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.

Depression, anxiety increases

FROM PAGE 1

six folds during the pandemic," Dr Helal Uddin Ahmed, co-author of the latest bulletin published by the IEDCR, told The Daily Star yesterday.

The study suggested that the collateral damage from the pandemic has continued with more people reporting rising levels of anxiety, depression and even suicidal thoughts.

Worryingly, around 38 people daily, and around 14,000 throughout the year, have committed suicide since March 2020, when the pandemic had begun, said the study revealed in a bulletin published by the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR).

Of them, at least seven had committed suicide "specifically due to Covid-19 related reason", according to the investigator of the latest NIMH study.

In 2019, this average was 32 per day, according to another study published in medRxiv journal by two researchers of the department of public health and informatics at Jahangirnagar University.

Physicians at the NIMH said they observed signs of deteriorating mental health in reaction to the toll of coronavirus infections and deaths and to the life-altering restrictions imposed by lockdowns.

He said, "The Covid-19 pandemic has already turned syndemic. It means that the pandemic is creating many problems [along with physical health issues] in human life indirectly. People from all occupations are suffering from a mental crisis. So, we have to put importance of the issue of mental health."

THE REASONS AND WAYOUT

According to the NIMH study, panic over being infected with the virus, uncertainty over getting treatment,

fear of death, economic upheaval and unemployment were among the reasons contributing to the mental health crisis.

The IEDCR bulletin also mentioned that the healthcare staffs of all levels are also suffering from stress and losing confidence due to Covid-19, which is badly affecting their mental health.

In this context, experts have suggested not to panic due to Covid-19 or any other reasons.

"We observed that the mental health problems have increased among people of all ages in different forms during the pandemic year. While the coronavirus disease itself is causing mental problems, the uncertainty over livelihood due to the lockdown has further aggravated it," Dr Nayem Akhter Abbassi, psychiatrist at the NIMH, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Dr Selim said, "Unless we can keep mental strength, we will not be able to sustain this pandemic. We have to take this pandemic as [a] normal [issue], because it will not be over soon. We have to learn how to live with Covid-19 instead of panicking."

"Panic weakens the normal immunity of the human body. So, it is urgent to reduce mental stress," the study said.

To stay safe from mental illness, the study mentioned made some suggestions, which include sleeping regularly on time, staying busy with favourite topics and tasks, spending quality time with family members, doing physical exercise every day, performing religious rituals at home, and being kind to others.

They also suggested contacting physicians or calling online health service numbers -- 16263 or 333 -- for further help.

Lucky ones get to go

FROM PAGE 1

Arabia, Muscat, Dubai, and Doha on these flights, sources at the HSA said.

Director, HSA, 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 nationwide "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.



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 SHUMON

Line of corpses

FROM PAGE 1

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

"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 need to complete just one burial process.

Prof Sultana Shahana Banu, head of the virology department at Dhaka Medical College, said wearing PPEs and other protective gears is 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."

Graveyard 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 burial for the burial of one body, no amount is charged for the burial of Covid-19 bodies.

Some 32 people work in two shifts at the graveyard.

Record 102 die

FROM PAGE 1

the total positivity rate stands at 13.91 percent.

A total of 19,404 samples were tested across the country in 24 hours.

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 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.

UK backs Prague after it expels Russian diplomats

AFP, London

Britain said yesterday that it "stands in full support of our Czech allies" after Prague expelled 18 Russian diplomats identified as secret agents of the Russian intelligence services suspected of involvement in a 2014 explosion.

Czech police investigating the blast said they were looking for two men with Russian passports that had also been used by the suspects in the 2018 poisoning attempt on Russian double agent Sergei Skripal in Britain.

"The UK stands in full support of our Czech allies, who have exposed the lengths that the Russian intelligence services will go to in their attempts to conduct dangerous and malign operations in Europe," said British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab in a statement.

"This shows a pattern of behaviour by Moscow, following the Novichok attack in Salisbury.

"We are as determined and committed as ever to bring those responsible for the attack in Salisbury to justice, and commend the actions of the Czech authorities to do the same."

He called on Russia to "desist from these actions, which violate the most basic international norms."

Britain on Thursday said it had summoned Russian ambassador in the UK Andrei Kelin to express its deep concern at what it called Moscow's "pattern of malign activity".

Kelin yesterday told BBC's Andrew Marr Show that he "hadn't seen Secretary Raab for more than a year."

"When I have come here a year and some months ago, I was full of aspirations that we can do better but in recent year our relations has become worse."

Pent up anger fuelled clash

FROM PAGE 1

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's 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 Salish 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 core 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.

Extended lockdown to be stricter

FROM PAGE 1

Tomorrow's [today] meeting of Secretary 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

Dhaka hotter in 20 years

FROM PAGE 1

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,

extreme population density means increased metabolic heating and greater anthropogenic activities," said Dewan, also a professor at School of Earth & Planetary Sciences, Curtin University, Australia.

He also said the rise of urban temperature is also associated with reduced evapotranspiration (the sum of water evaporation and transpiration from a surface area to the atmosphere) due to abundance of concrete structures. "Besides, waste heat from transports, buildings and industrial areas deteriorates the urban thermal environment," said Dewan.

"To reduce urban heating, the expert geographer stressed on placing greenery strategically in heat-exposed areas instead of aiming for a high percent of green cover over particular areas.

"As the country is frequently affected by various types of natural hazards such as floods, public policies are well developed to lessen the impacts of natural disasters. Policies however are not well conceived for reducing urban warming. Hence, location-specific mitigation measures are imperative. In other words, adaptation strategies should be developed based on a city's attributes. Spatial planning can therefore be an important tool in this respect," Dewan concluded.

Renowned urban planner Neaz Rahman pointed at destruction of green space, especially those with large trees.

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.