

Delhi under

FROM PAGE 12

than 31 million infections. The country's deaths from Covid-19 rose by a record 1,501 to reach a total of 177,150.

As cases rise across India, criticism is mounting over how Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration has handled the health crisis, as religious festivals and election rallies attended by thousands continue.

India's government relaxed almost all lockdown curbs of last year by the beginning of 2021, although some regions including New Delhi and the state of Maharashtra, home to financial hub Mumbai, have introduced localised restrictions.

While Mumbai remains under curfew on all days as per state guidelines, New Delhi has allowed cinema halls to operate at 30% capacity and people to move freely during weekdays.

"There is no option but to lockdown Delhi for 1-2 weeks," said Dr. Ambrish Mithal, a top doctor of endocrinology and diabetes at hospital operator Max Healthcare, adding that weekend curfews "won't do".

"(The) situation is unmanageable at present," he said on Twitter.

RELIGIOUS FESTIVAL

Amid reports of severe shortage of oxygen supplies and critical medicines such as the anti-viral drug Remdesivir, Modi on Saturday asked authorities to pull out all the steps to ramp up production of Covid-19 vaccines and asked his teams to work closely with local governments.

After hundreds of thousands of ascetics and devout Hindus gathered for several days along the banks of the Ganges for a religious festival Kumbh Mela, Modi on Saturday called for restraint, saying on Twitter the festival should now be kept "symbolic".

Responding to Modi's appeal, one of the religious leaders Swami Avdheshanand urged devotees to not gather in large numbers.

Those returning to Mumbai from the Kumbh Mela will have to quarantine, the city mayor said.

Experts have warned about the spread of more contagious variants of the disease, especially during large-scale gatherings for religious festivals and political rallies.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi - who has also addressed election rallies in recent weeks - said yesterday he was suspending all his public rallies in West Bengal.

Media distorted

FROM PAGE 12

abduct Ilias Ali. I did not even say that. My statement was twisted.

"As a member of the party's standing committee, it is possible for me to say that BNP leaders abducted Ilias Ali?"

Mirza Abbas also said, "I did not make any comment for which I have to be embarrassed to the nation, the party, its leaders and activists."

"Those who listened to my statement probably could not understand. I am sorry that I could not make them understand."

Asked whether he said that the government did not abduct Ilias Ali, Mirza Abbas said, "I commented sarcastically. It means that government should say where Ilias Ali is. The government has to answer."

"Ilias Ali was abducted during this government's tenure. If the government does not know, then who knows? I wanted to say this."

This paper has footage of Abbas saying on Saturday that some BNP men were behind the disappearance of Ilias Ali.

Eight family members killed in Afghanistan mosque shooting

AFP, Jalalabad

Eight members of the same family were gunned down in an attack on a mosque in eastern Afghanistan, officials said yesterday.

The shooting happened on Saturday night in the city of Jalalabad in Nangarhar province, and was believed to be over a land dispute, the province's governor Zaiulhaq Amarkhil said.

Five brothers and three of their male cousins were killed.

"The incident is under investigation but initial information shows a land dispute has caused the incident," Amarkhil told AFP.

Fareed Khan, a spokesman for Nangarhar police, confirmed the attack.

Afghanistan, like the rest of the Muslim world, is observing the holy month of Ramadan, when men gather every night to offer special prayers after fasting for the day.

Revenge killings are common in Afghanistan, where families seek justice by carrying out violent acts of vengeance based on an ancient code of honour.

So-called blood feuds can last for decades, passing down through generations in a cycle of violence.



Workers prepare to fill medical oxygen cylinders for hospital use on Covid-19 patients on the outskirts of Jabalpur, India yesterday.

Renowned actor Wasim laid to rest

FROM PAGE 12

He was crowned "Mr East Pakistan" for his bodybuilding and fitness in 1964.

The actor studied at Mymensingh Zilla School and Anandomohan College in Mymensingh. He pursued his bachelor's and master's in general history from Dhaka University. He worked at Bangladesh Betar after his graduation. Wasim also served as the first secretary general of the National Sports Council.

He entered the film industry as an assistant director in 1972 with the film "Chhando Hariye Gelo", where he also had a cameo role.

Wasim made his silver screen debut

as a lead actor in "Raater Por Din" (1973), opposite Babita, directed by Mohsin. After the success of this film, there was no looking back for Wasim. The actor garnered a huge fan following with his brilliance in different films.

His film "The Rain" (1976), directed by SM Shafi, gained acclaim both at home and abroad. Featuring Olivia Gomez opposite Wasim, the movie was dubbed in 46 languages and released in over 46 countries worldwide.

Wasim worked in over 150 films in his illustrious career. His notable releases include "Norom Gorom", "Rajdulari", "Inaam", "Bahadur",

"Dost Dushman" (1977), and "Chandan Deeper Rajkonna", among many others.

"I shared the screen with Wasim in my debut film 'Rajmahal' in 1979 and it was a super hit project," said noted actor Rozina.

"Working with such a superstar was a big opportunity for me at the time. We went on to work together in many other films, including 'Bini Shutar Mala', and 'Manoshi'. Wasim has left behind an iconic legacy of work."

"He was a close confidante to me," said noted playback singer Khurshid Alam. "I have lent my voice to several of his popular songs, including 'Chumki Choleche Eka Pothe'. I have

many fond memories with him."

Wasim appeared in films with celebrated actors like Shabana, Babita, and Anjana. His chemistry with Olivia Gomez and Anju Ghosh was outstanding.

"I last met him during Obhinoyn Shilpi Shongho Bangladesh's elections. He was a charismatic person," shared noted actor Anjana. "These times have been tough for us. We have lost many icons of the industry in the last few months."

Wasim's first namaz-e-janaza was held at Gulshan Azad Mosque after Zuhr prayers yesterday. His second janaza was held at Banani Graveyard, where he was laid to rest.

Bangladesh Cabinet discusses

FROM PAGE 12

Government of West Bengal seeking permission for a meeting with the chief minister.

HEAVY FIGHTING REPORTED

Heavy fighting was reported today in several areas of Bangladesh including Kasba and Shalukati where the Pakistani army was said to be pressing an all-out offensive to seal off the borders.

Today the Press Trust of India reported that fighting had been going on for Meherpur, three miles from the Indian border in the western sector of Bangladesh.

THE CONCEPT OF A UNITED

PAKISTAN IS DEAD

A paper prepared by the US National Security Council's Interdepartmental Group for Near East and South Asia assessed the situation in East Pakistan in the following words:

"Psychologically the concept of a united Pakistan is dead in Bengal. We see no way in which President Yahya can establish a civilian government based on any significant degree of popular support. There are, however, signs that some of the non-Awami League political leaders in East Pakistan, motivated either by fear or hatred of India, concern for the suffering of the Bengali people

or by personal ambition, will come forward to re-establish a civilian administration in cooperation with President Yahya. They may be joined by some Awami Leaguers who are unwilling to adopt a revolutionary posture. The Government of Pakistan (GOP) will probably attempt to transfer some power to them to give the military administration a facade of legitimacy. It may even concede most of the Awami League's six point autonomist program. Eventually in its search for legitimacy, the GOP might hold controlled elections or perhaps a constitutional referendum in East Pakistan under a franchise excluding Hindus and dissident

groups. The only alternative would seem to be direct negotiations with the Awami League leadership. Such negotiations would in present circumstances probably have only one issue to resolve -- the terms of independence, though a solution such as confederation remains an outside possibility. For the present, negotiations seem unlikely and, because of the bitterness and mistrust engendered by the civil wars, could probably only take place if Yahya himself were to offer to step down."

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Drowning in debt

FROM PAGE 12

they often face difficulties in finding employment commensurate with their experience.

The IOM report painted a dismal picture of the increase in the household debt of the returnee migrant workers and negative coping measures that migrant households adopted including reducing expenditure on health and borrowing money to pay back loans.

Sulaiman Mia is one such returnee. When the 46-year-old from Noakhali's Senbagh was forced to return home from Bahrain in March last year, his employer promised to rehire him once the situation normalised.

A few months after his return, he repeatedly communicated with his employer in Bahrain, but his employer refused every time to renew his work permit citing the economic crisis.

Finding no other alternative, he borrowed around Tk 1.6 lakh from relatives, took a bank loan of Tk

50,000 and another loan of Tk 30,000 from an NGO. He even sold off gold ornaments belonging to his wife and mother to make ends meet.

"I have been unemployed since I came back. Now I am thinking of selling a piece of land to repay the borrowed money. What else can I do, as I am overwhelmed with debt," said a helpless Sulaiman.

He said although he spent nearly 20 years abroad, he could not save enough money since his entire earnings was spent to meet daily family needs and building a new house.

Masud Mollah's condition is similarly bleak.

Hailing from Narsingdi, the 32-year-old returned from Libya in February this year. He said he had borrowed around Tk 80,000 from neighbours and another Tk 60,000 from a local cooperative to pay his migration costs in 2019.

Although he repaid the Tk 80,000 loan, he is yet to repay five out of 11

instalments against the Tk 60,000 loan, he said.

"It's an uncertain future ahead," Masud added.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Shariful Hasan, head of Brac Migration Programme, said the pandemic forced a large number of migrant workers to return home within two to three years of their migration.

This group of migrants either borrowed money or sold their properties to pay migration costs, he said, adding at the time of their return, many of them were in debt.

And after returning home, they took fresh loans or borrowed money mostly to meet family expenses, he added.

Shariful said the government needs to create employment opportunities for the unemployed to help them come out of debt.

Many Bangladeshi migrant workers are hired by construction companies in host countries and they develop skills in the sector. So, upon their

return, the government can create opportunities for such workers in development projects inside the country, he said.

Similarly, returnees with other skills could be employed in relevant fields inside the country. Besides, there should be effort for those who want to re-migrate, he further said.

Contacted, Nazibul Islam, additional secretary (training) of expatriates' welfare ministry, said the ministry has taken an initiative to provide returnee migrants with recognition of prior learning (RPL) certificates.

On obtaining a RPL certificate, a returnee migrant will be able to get a job in the domestic labour market while it will also help him or her re-migrate, Nazibul told this newspaper over the phone.

The official said initially, their target is to provide RPL certificates to 2,000 returnees, but the number could be extended based on response from the returnees.

Scientists create 'whitest paint ever' to keep homes cool

FROM PAGE 12

The developers said the new white could be the closest equivalent of the blackest black, Vantablack, which was developed in 2014 and absorbs up to 99.9 per cent of visible light.

The paint is so white due to a high concentration of barium sulphate, which is used to make photo paper and cosmetics white.

"We looked at various commercial products, basically anything that's white," said Xiangyu Li, a postdoctoral

researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who worked on the project. "We found that using barium sulphate, you can theoretically make things really, really reflective, which means that they're really, really white."

A high concentration of barium sulphate particles can scatter more light as the particles are all different sizes, meaning they can cover more of the light spectrum.

Researchers found that the paint could keep surfaces 8F below their

surroundings during strong sunlight in the middle of the day, and 19F below at night.

"If you were to use this paint to cover a roof area of about 1,000 sqft, we estimate that you could get a cooling power of 10kw. That's more powerful than the central air conditioners used by most houses," said Xiulin Ruan, a professor of mechanical engineering at Purdue.

The use of air conditioners and electric fans accounted for nearly 10 percent of global electricity use by

2018, a figure that is expected to rise to nearly 40 percent by 2050, according to a report from the International Energy Agency (IEA).

Many of the world's hottest countries are developing economies where a rise in personal income was found to correspond with demand for home air conditioning.

In China, where demand has risen fastest, energy consumption from air conditioning has shot up by 13 percent a year since 2000, the IEA found.

Govt tightens

FROM PAGE 1

resist the policemen but eventually stepped back seeing a huge number of law enforcers.

Mamunul was first taken to DMP deputy commissioner's office (Tejgaon Division) and then to the Tejgaon Police Station for primary interrogation. Later, he was brought to the DB office.

Talking to this newspaper, Harun-or-Rashid, DMP deputy commissioner (Tejgaon Division), said, "We are investigating a case filed with Mohammadpur Police Station in 2020 following vandalism by Hefajat men. We found evidence that Mamunul was involved in the incident and then we arrested him."

"Besides, there are cases against him at different police stations, including Paltan Police Station. We have learnt that he will be shown arrested in those cases later."

He further said Mamunul was under watch following recent incidents of violence by Hefajat men in different parts of the country.

The Hefajat leader had given provocative speeches during the 2013 Hefajat mayhem at the capital's Shapla Chattar, mentioned Harun-or-Rashid.

At different recent programmes, he also instigated people, who attacked police stations, police outposts and other establishment across the country, the DC said in reply to a query at his office.

He would be produced before a court today, added the police official.

Mamunul, son of late Bangladesh Khilafah Majlis leader Allama Azizul Haque, became a known figure at waz mahfil. In recent times, he was even spotted using helicopters to reach venues of waz mahfil in different parts of the country, sources said.

If organisers of a waz mahfil wished to have him as a speaker, they had to contact him at least a year before the programme, added the sources.

Recently, Hefajat supporters took part in protests against Modi's visit and carried out widespread violence in Dhaka, Narayanganj, Chattogram and Brahmanbaria.

From March 26 to 28, at least 17 people were killed in violence, and 73 cases were filed with different police stations over for violence and mayhem in different districts, according to sources.

Police say Mamunul was one of the instigators of these acts of violence.

On April 3, Mamunul was confined by locals and Awami League men in a resort in Narayanganj, along with a woman who he claimed to be his second wife.

A group of Hefajat leaders and activists then blocked the Dhaka-Chattogram highway, staged demonstrations, vandalised vehicles and ransacked the resort.

Six cases were filed against Mamunul and Hefajat supporters following the vandalism. Since then, he had taken shelter at the madrasa to avoid arrest. While staying there, he went live on Facebook and made posts on the social media platform several times.

Meanwhile, law enforcers beefed up security measures in Brahmanbaria town and its outskirts following Mamunul's arrest, reports our Brahmanbaria correspondent.

Over the last seven days, law enforcers arrested eight central leaders of Hefajat, and made them accused in cases filed over the 2013 Hefajat mayhem.

On May 5, 2013, thousands of Hefajat members clashed with law enforcers and AL men, turning Motijheel and Paltan areas into battlefields.

A total of 83 cases were filed in seven districts, including Dhaka, accusing 3,416 named and 84,796 unnamed people. Many of the accused were from Hefajat, Jamaat-e-Islami and the BNP.

Police have pressed charges in 18 cases and given final reports in two other cases. Investigation reports in 62 other cases are yet to be submitted to court.

Law enforcers recently sped up the pace of investigation and started arresting Hefajat leaders following the government's green signal, say sources.

AL insiders said Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was irked by Hefajat's violent protests against Modi's visit on March 26 -- the day of celebration of the golden jubilee of the country's independence.

Talking to The Daily Star, AL Presidium Member and agriculture minister Dr Abdur Razzaque said the government is very annoyed by Hefajat's anti-state activities and acts of violence.

"We will handle them with an iron fist like we did in case of the anti-liberation element Jamaat in the past."

"What they are doing in the name of a religion is totally unacceptable. The government will not spare them," said the senior AL leader.

Hefajat first appeared on the scene in 2009 by protesting a draft national women development policy that provided equal inheritance rights to women.

Things changed after the 2013 mayhem at Shapla Chattar, and Shafi and the AL government got closer. But a faction of Hefajat, led by Junayed Babunagari, was totally against the outfit's "soft approach" towards the government, according to several Hefajat leaders.

Babunagari was declared Hefajat ameer in November, about two months after Shafi's death.

Soon after the formation of the new committee, Hefajat hogged the headlines as it strongly opposed the construction of Bangabandhu's sculpture in the capital and gave anti-government statements.

Migrant trafficking gang busted in Greece

AFP, Athens

Greek police have dismantled a migrant trafficking network accused of abducting and torturing two people, the Athens News Agency reported yesterday.

Police operations early Saturday

targeted four houses in the northern city of Thessaloniki, during which 13 foreigners aged 19 to 26 were arrested.

A 20-year-old man believed to be the mastermind of a ring that allegedly transported migrants within Greece and abroad was among those detained.

According to police, the traffickers had transported 22 migrants between mid-March and mid-April.

They also are accused of locking two migrants, aged 16 and 21, in a shed and demanding money from their families.

One of the hostages alleged that a

trafficker tried to rape him.

Electric irons and sticks said to have been used by gang members to torture their hostages were seized by the police, along with multiple mobile phones, a laptop computer, identity documents and five powerful vehicles used to transport the migrants.