

BANGLADESH UPDATE



4,271
New cases in 24hrs



7,23,221
Total cases



10,497
Deaths



6,21,300
Recoveries



3,039,201
Deaths



142,540,178
Total cases

'Give us food, then enforce lockdown'

Low-wage earners demand

MUNTAKIM SAAD

As the "lockdown" was extended for seven more days from April 22 to 28, labourers living from hand to mouth feared the distresses that lay ahead.

Rickshaw-pullers, auto-rickshaw drivers and hawkers said if they do not go out to work, their families would starve.

"It's very easy to announce a 'lockdown'. But people like us bear the brunt. Give us food, then enforce a lockdown," said Md Hossain, who sells wallets and sunglasses on the sidewalk in Farmgate.

In the last week, he was unable to fully open his shop.

"Even if I opened for some time, dodging police, there were no customers," he said, adding that he is now empty-handed.

Hailing from Monohorgonj of Cumilla, Hossain recalled the lockdown last year when he went back to his village and was jobless for two months.

"We are a family of 11 and had to take loan from others. We got no help from the government. We heard that the government gave relief, but we didn't see that," Hossain said in frustration.

Like Hossain, some other hawkers in Farmgate also tried to open their shops dodging the police yesterday.

Labourers, rickshaw-pullers and CNG-run auto-rickshaw drivers said they were worried about the lockdown as the financial setback it has dealt is more than that of possible health setbacks.

During the ongoing weeklong "strict lockdown", the number of rickshaws and auto-rickshaws on the streets has been increasing every day despite the restrictions and, what rickshaw-pullers and auto-rickshaw drivers termed, harassment at police check points.

As the days go by, the restrictions during the weeklong "lockdown" seem to be relaxing. On the sixth day yesterday, all types of transport except buses could be seen plying the roads of the capital. Moreover, the movement of pedestrians has also increased.

Those dependent on daily earnings for their livelihood said they have no problem staying at home, but the government must ensure food and aid for them.

Mosharraf used to work as a helper on a bus that ran between Dhaka and Chattogram. The pandemic caused a change in his profession -- since last

year's lockdown, he has been working as a rickshaw-puller in Dhaka.

"Last year, we got aid from affluent people. On the streets, you could see them with bags of relief. But this time, there is nothing. No one is helping us," said Mosharraf.

He said if he does not take his rickshaw out even for a day, his family would have to starve.

"Now I can earn Tk 300-400 daily. My rent is Tk 4,000. I have three children. How will I run the family if the lockdown extends like this?" Mosharraf asked.

In Farmgate, another rickshaw-puller, Nurul Islam from Jamalpur, was sitting idly with three others in the afternoon, with no possible passengers in sight.

"Now there is no crowd. It's a matter of luck to get a passenger. Earlier, we used to charge Tk 250 to go from Farmgate to Gabtoli. Now the passenger offers only Tk 60," Nurul said.

They said extension of the lockdown is a curse for them.

Meanwhile, auto-rickshaw drivers and workers of light vehicle demanded direct food and financial support from the government to survive amid the all-out lockdown that has been announced until April 28.

In a joint statement, Bangladesh Auto-Rickshaw Light Vehicle Transport Workers Federation (BALIWF) President Abul Hossain and Secretary Md Golam Faruk said the operation of lakhs of three-wheelers and light vehicles has been suspended due to the lockdown.

"This ultimately left us in big trouble as we have become unemployed and our families will have to spend the days unfed," they said.

They want the government to provide financial and food support so that families of drivers and workers could survive in the month of Ramadan.

According to a new study by Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), over 3 percent of the labour force lost jobs while 16.38 million people became new poor amid the pandemic.

The most affected workers' groups were the labourers in urban areas engaged in construction, informal services, rickshaw-pulling, and launch and boat driving.

Self-employed people like street vendors, hawkers, tea sellers, food stall owners and repairmen were also among the worst hit.



People broke a section of a barricade installed by police to enforce the nationwide "lockdown" to curb the spread of Covid-19 and went on the pavement to travel to their destinations. The photo was taken at Lama Bazar in Sylhet city yesterday afternoon.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

CID asked to probe 23 cases

FROM PAGE 1

General Mamunul Haque on a seven-day remand in an attempted murder case filed with the Mohammadpur Police Station on March 7 last year.

Dhaka Metropolitan Magistrate Debdash Chandra Adhikari passed the order after Investigation Officer Md Sajedul Haque, also a sub-inspector of Mohammadpur Police Station, placed Mamunul before the court.

In the remand prayer, the IO said as per the direction of Mamunul and his brother Mahfuzul Haque, five named and some 70 to 80 unnamed students of Jamia Rahmania Arabia madrasa attacked the complainant and others, and obstructed them from performing a sermon at a mosque in the capital's Mohammadpur on March 6 last year.

Moreover, Mamunul provoked the devout Muslims and madrasa students through his anti-state comments, which is why he needs to be remanded to glean information about others responsible for committing such offences, the IO added.

From the court, Mamunul was taken to the DB office on Minto Road yesterday. Police said Mamunul will be interrogated there.

A joint team of Tejgaon division police and DMP's Detective Branch arrested Mamunul on Sunday.

On March 7 last year, one GM Alamgir Shahin filed the case with Mohammadpur Police Station, accusing Mamunul and six other named and some 70-80 unnamed persons, accusing them of attempted murder, vandalism, looting a Samsung phone, Tk 7,000, US\$ 2,000 and a Brac Bank debit card during an attack at a local mosque, and also threatening devout Muslims.

CID TO INVESTIGATE CASES

Of the total 23 cases handed over to CID, 18 were filed regarding the violence and arson attacks that took place from March 26-28 in different districts including Chattogram and Brahmanbaria, according to law enforcement officials.

The CID was also given charge of investigation of five other cases filed in 2016 in Brahmanbaria following mayhem and arson attack in the town by

Hefajat supporters.

Some more cases will be handed over to the CID, who specialise in forensic, cyber and digital evidence analysis, said the officials.

Talking with The Daily Star yesterday, Barrister Mahbubur Rahman, additional inspector general of police and also the chief of the CID, said, "We will provide technical and forensic evidence of sabotage activities of those cases."

"We have already started collecting evidence. We have collected CCTV footage and videos of those incidents," he said and requested the media to provide footage and still pictures to assist in the investigation.

The CID chief said if the forensic investigation could prove sabotage, the culprits will not find any scope to get away.

Regarding the transfer of Hefajat cases to CID, several police officials said it could be difficult to get all the details of the cases filed in 2013 as a lot of time has already elapsed.

So, police are placing focus on forensic and technological analysis to prove these cases, they added.

Over 350 people, mostly Hefajat supporters, have already been arrested by police for their involvement in the cases. Besides, some nine top leaders including Mamunul were also arrested by police for their alleged involvement in the violence in 2013.

In the last eight years since May 2013, more than 160 cases were filed against leaders and activists of Hefajat-e-Islam.

Of the cases, 83 were filed in seven districts including Dhaka, accusing 3,416 named and 84,796 unnamed people centring the Hefajat mayhem on May 5, 2013 at Shapla Chatter.

Police have so far pressed charges in 18 cases, and gave final reports in two other cases filed in 2013. Only one of the cases, in Bagerhat, has been disposed of.

But all the accused were acquitted as neither the police nor the prosecutors could prove them guilty of the charges of attempted murder, arson and vandalism, according to law enforcement officials.

Besides, 73 more cases were filed in Dhaka and five other districts against

45,000 unnamed people for the mayhem and arson attacks that took place between March 26 to 28 of this year centring Hefajat's protest against the Indian prime minister's two-day visit to Bangladesh from March 26.

Last night's hour-long meeting between top Hefajat leaders and the home minister started around 10:00pm, reports our staff correspondent who was present at the location.

Senior police officials were also present.

Hefajat Nayeb-e-Amir Ataullah Hafeji, Hefajat Secretary General Nurul Islam Jihadi, Qawmi Madrasa Education Board (Befaq) Secretary General Mahfuzul Haque -- who is also Mamunul Haque's brother -- and Hefajat joint secretary general Habibullah Miaji, among others, were present.

There was no formal briefing from any side after the meeting.

The home minister did not answer his phone despite repeated attempts to contact him.

Earlier yesterday, Hefajat Amir Junayed Babunagari in a video message demanded unconditional release of all "Ulema-Masayek" of Hefajat and all its leaders including Mamunul Haque and the party's Organising Secretary Azizul Haque Islamabadi.

TOP LEADERS UNDER SURVEILLANCE

Intelligence sources said some two dozen top leaders of Hefajat remain under surveillance of law enforcement agencies, including the Secretary General Nurul Islam Jihadi.

These leaders would be arrested by phases once evidence is collected against them, added law enforcement sources.

Asked about giving charge to CID on investigating Hefajat cases, Sohail Rana, assistant inspector general of Police Headquarters, said there is scope to engage proper authorities for proper investigation of any case.

"Therefore, whenever the involvement of any particular unit or officers is essential, they are engaged. This is done within the purview of usual legal provisions," he told The Daily Star.

Lockdown extends

FROM PAGE 1

The NTAC earlier recommended what it said would be a "full-fledged lockdown".

The Cabinet Division on April 4 issued an 11-point directive with a set of restrictions effective from 6:00am on April 5 to 12:00am on April 11. The directive allowed offices, mills and factories to operate.

The government later allowed resumption of bus services in the cities and lifted restrictions on shops and malls.

As experts doubted whether the "half-hearted 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.

Yesterday was the sixth day of the current restrictions.

Although all public and private offices remained shuttered and public transport suspended, there were many rickshaws, auto-rickshaws and private vehicles on the thoroughfares.

Emergency services, garments and other factories, and a few branches of banks continued their operations.

While shopping malls and larger stores in the capital remain closed, many shops that are not selling groceries and drugs have been open with half-closed shutters.

Meanwhile, Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader at a

press conference yesterday said, "The government is planning to ease the lockdown so that people can live their lives, go shopping before Eid, and visit the hometowns. I'm requesting everyone to make mental preparations and be patient."

NEW RECORD EVERYDAY

The deaths reported yesterday took the toll to 10,497, according to a handout from the Directorate General of Health Services.

The death rate now stands at 1.45 percent.

Among those reported dead yesterday, 75 were men and 37 women. Ten were aged between 31 and 40 years, 12 between 41 and 50, 26 between 51 and 60, and 64 above 60, said the release.

At least 4,271 new infections were recorded, taking the total number of people infected to 7,23,221.

The current positivity rate is 17.68 percent while the overall positivity rate is 13.92 percent.

The new cases were detected through testing 24,152 samples across the country in the 24 hours preceding 8:00am yesterday.

At least 6,364 patients recovered during the period taking the total number of recoveries to 6,21,300. The recovery rate was 85.91 percent as of yesterday.

Govt forms body

FROM PAGE 1

Alam, DG of Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), told The Daily Star yesterday.

He also said Sinopharm, the Chinese vaccine manufacturer, through a third party, submitted a proposal, which the committee will scrutinise.

"The committee will give suggestions and then a decision will be made," he said.

The DG said the committee can co-opt other members if needed.

Asked whether the existing vaccination campaign will be hampered, the DG said if vaccines do not reach on time, there is a chance of disruption.

Sinopharm has offered 60 lakh doses of its Covid-19 vaccine to Bangladesh when the country has been witnessing an intense surge in daily infection rates and deaths.

With the Serum Institute failing to comply with the commitment to supply three crore vaccine shots in six instalments, the Bangladesh government started to explore alternative sources for the jabs in a desperate attempt to continue the inoculation drive against Covid-19, DGHS officials said.

Sinopharm, through a medium, recently made the offer to Bangladesh, they added.

In early 2020, the Beijing Institute

of Biological Products created an inactivated coronavirus vaccine called BBIBP-CoV. China, UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Pakistan and some other countries across the world are currently using it.

The World Health Organization is yet to give the approval for the vaccine. But the WHO advisory panel said Sinopharm has presented data on their Covid-19 vaccines indicating levels of efficacy.

Apart from this, the Bangladesh government is also communicating with Russia for their vaccine -- Sputnik V.

The government had earlier signed an agreement to purchase three crore doses of vaccines from SII through its local agent Beximco. As per the agreement, the government was supposed to get 50 lakh doses of vaccines each month. But till yesterday, the government has only received 70 lakh doses of vaccines in two instalments.

New Delhi reportedly imposed a temporary restriction on all major exports of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine made by SII to meet demands at home, reported global media.

Contacted, Nazmul Hassan Papon, managing director of Beximco, said they are yet to get any details from Serum but are hopeful of getting the vaccines soon.

Railway projects falling behind

FROM PAGE 1

progress of railway projects.

After decades of neglect, the railway started getting increased allocations when the Awami League-led alliance assumed power in 2009.

In the five consecutive fiscal years, including the current one, the government allocated Tk 56,964.21 crore for various development and technical assistance projects. BR, however, spent only Tk 30,493.29 crore until October last year, according to its data.

The railways ministry has a long record of poor implementation rate of the annual development programme (ADP). In the last five fiscal years, the ministry could not achieve the average implementation rate, except in 2017-18, documents show.

PROJECTS RUNNING BEHIND SCHEDULE

Currently, BR is implementing 39 projects costing a total of Tk 1,41,883.70 crore, most of which are funded by loans from various countries including India, China, Japan, and South Korea as well as from the Asian Development Bank.

Of these projects, 20 are for construction, rehabilitation, expansion of rail lines or bridges, or installing signalling system and level crossings.

Besides, seven projects are being implemented for procuring or renovating locomotives or carriages, nine for carrying out feasibility studies for proposed projects, and three projects for technical assistance.

Deadlines of 24 of these 39 projects are set to pass in June this year, show BR documents.

Only four projects may meet their deadlines, a top BR official told The Daily Star recently.

"The rest of the projects have to go through revision and some of the revision proposals have already been sent to the Planning Commission," said the official, who requested not to be named.

Three of the four projects that may meet the deadline are for carrying out feasibility studies for construction of a circular rail around Dhaka, construction of a rail line from Bhanga to Payra Port via Barishal, and construction of the Dhaka-Chittagong high speed rail line.

The remaining project was for installation and commissioning of an optical fibre-based telecommunication system along BR's 575km-long secondary lines.

The authorities, however, cancelled another project undertaken for carrying out a feasibility study to introduce a new rail line from Gobra to Pirojpur and rail connection to Bagerhat, sources said.

PROJECT REVISIONS COMMON

Scrutinising project documents, this correspondent found nineteen of the 24 projects, including the four which may meet the June deadline, have already been revised at least once and some multiple times.

For example, construction of the 64.75km Khulna-Mongla Port rail line was supposed to be completed within three years of the government approving the Khulna-Mongla Port Rail Line Project in December 2010. This project is the first to start among the 24.

But the project's physical work began around six years after the approval. In the meantime, the cost of the project -- being implemented with India's first line of credit -- rose to Tk 3,801 crore, 120 percent higher than the original estimate.

The delays did not end here. The project authorities recently placed a revision proposal to the BR, seeking another Tk 997.35 crore and one-year extension of the project's current deadline in June this year.

As of February this year, the project witnessed 78 percent progress.

Among the remaining 15 projects which do not have a June deadline, six have had costs and deadline already revised once.

The projects are construction of the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Railway Bridge over Jamuna River, construction of a rail line from Chattogram to Cox's Bazar, construction of the 3rd and 4th lines from Dhaka and Tongi and a double line from Tongi and Joydebpur, construction of the Dhaka-Jashore rail line through Padma Bridge, rehabilitation of Kulaura-Shahbazpur section, and procurement of 70 metre gauge locomotives.

Deadlines of the nine projects which have not already been revised are between June 2022 and June 2025. However, physical works of most of these projects have not started yet although significant amounts of project implementation time have already passed, shows document.

For example, the government had approved a project to build a double rail line along the existing single track from Khulna to Darshana aimed at boosting trade activities with neighbouring countries via Mongla Port.

The project was supposed to be implemented from January 2018 to December 2022 at a cost of Tk 3,506.75 crore under Indian lines of credit.

Half the project period has elapsed, but the project authorities have not even appointed a consultant yet, let alone starting the physical work.

Asked why such a large proportion of railways projects fail to be completed

within their stipulated time and deadlines have to be revised, BR's Director General Dharendra Nath Mazumder said, "Deadlines have to be changed as works can't be completed."

"Reasons vary from one project to another."

One project might have fallen behind due to delays in land acquisition while another project might have faced delays for belated release of funds, the BR DG told The Daily Star on April 13.

"Above all, Covid-19 pandemic played a major role here," he said.

Asked whether they have any plan to expedite overall progress of the projects, Dharendra Nath said, "What can we do now amid the Covid-19 pandemic? This is a global problem."

POOR PLANNING

Prof Shamsul Hoque of Buet's civil engineering department blamed poor planning on the basis of so-called feasibility studies as the main reason for time and project costs running over.

He said a feasibility study has to be done considering all necessary elements but these have now turned out to be a "mere formality" and a "mockery".

Consultants carry out feasibility studies as per the wishes of their clients and project high ambitious aspects of the projects, he said.

"You won't find any project that consultants find non-feasible," said Prof Shamsul.

Many important aspects are ignored and unresolved in the feasibility study and when the project authorities undertake implementation, they have to change many things, resulting in time and costs escalation, said the prominent transport expert.

This type of malpractice continues as the consultants, project authorities and implementing or approving agencies are never held responsible for this poor planning, he added.

"A poor feasibility study leads to poor planning, which leads to rise in project costs and time," he told The Daily Star on March 20.

Prof Shamsul said many government agencies like BR lack the capacity to implement such mega projects due to a lack of technical manpower, he said.

Besides, all people involved with these projects benefit from delays in some way or the other and they don't have to be accountable for their actions, he added.

"One or two projects may face delays and cost escalation. But almost all projects are facing the same fate, meaning there are faults in the system that are increasing our development pain. "These should be fixed first."

Those who grow food can't go hungry: PM

BSS, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said her government is extending all sorts of support to the farmers to help them grow more food in view of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic alongside the measures to make sure that they will have food in their homes.

"We're giving all types of assistance to the farmers, including proper testing of soil, so that the food production of our country can be doubled or tripled to meet their growing demand," she said in a video message marking the 49th founding anniversary of Bangladesh Krishak League (BKL) today.

Sheikh Hasina, also the president of the Bangladesh Awami League, said that her government has taken steps so that the farmers have food in their homes and granaries.

"It can't happen anymore that those who grow food will not get food or their children at home will have no food," she asserted.

BNP demands release of religious leaders, alem-ulema

UNB, Dhaka

Expressing concern over the recent arrest of religious leaders and alem-ulema in "false" cases, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir yesterday demanded their immediate release.

"I earlier said the government launched a crackdown taking advantage of the lockdown over the last few days. It's arresting BNP leaders and activists, religious leaders and alem-ulema indiscriminately," he said.

Speaking at a virtual press conference, the BNP leader said it is regrettable that the respected alem-ulema and religious leaders are being arrested and many "false" cases are being filed against them. "I call for the immediate release of the alem-ulema and withdrawal of all these cases."

He also urged the government to free the BNP leaders and activists arrested in many "false" cases.

Fakhrul accused the government of hurting the sentiment of devoted Muslims in Bangladesh by arresting the alem-ulema in the month of Ramadan. "Religious people in the country won't accept insulting and harassing the religious leaders in this way."

He said the BNP has no political link with Hefajat-e-Islam as it is completely a religious organisation, not a political party.

The BNP leader alleged that the government was behind the incidents that happened on March 26 over the protest of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh. "The government itself created such a situation in a planned way so that those incidents happen."

He said the demonstration at Baitul Mukarram on the Independence Day was peaceful initially, but the situation turned volatile later due to the role of police and the attack by ruling party men.

Fakhrul said the violent incidents took place in Chattogram and Brahmanbaria later as a sequel to Baitul Mukarram one.

He said the government has been trying to implicate BNP leaders and activists in the violent incidents to hide facts. "We want to clearly say that the BNP was never involved in those incidents. We only registered our protests