

BANGLADESH UPDATE

4,559
New cases in 24hrs

7,27,780
Total cases

105,88
Deaths

6,28,111
Recoveries

3,050,795
Deaths

143,302,632
Total cases

Domestic flights resume today

Bangladesh-China flights now allowed

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Flight operations on all seven domestic routes will resume today on a limited scale after a 16-day suspension.

Group Captain Chy M Zia Ul Kabir, member (Flight Standard & Regulations) of Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh, told The Daily Star yesterday.

The number of passengers and flights will be limited on different routes, he added.

All domestic routes will open except Cox's Bazar, said sources in CAAB.

On April 3, it decided to suspend all domestic flights in Bangladesh from April 5 to curb the spread of Covid-19.

Aviation Operators Association of Bangladesh has been demanding withdrawal of the suspension, saying that flying is the safest mode of transportation as airlines operators follow health guidelines properly while operating their flights.

Talking to The Daily Star, officials of US-Bangla Airlines and Novo Air, two private carriers of the country, said they were ready to resume flights on domestic routes.

FLIGHTS TO CHINA RESUME

The CAAB yesterday said due to urgency of Bangladeshi passengers, it has decided to allow flights of Biman, US-Bangla, China Eastern and China Southern airlines to operate passenger flights between Dhaka and China under special consideration.

Passengers coming to Bangladesh

by the flights cleared under this special consideration shall strictly have to complete a 14-day institutional quarantine in the government nominated facilities or at hotels on passenger's own expenses.

Airlines shall issue boarding passes after ensuring that the institutional quarantine arrangements is in place for the passenger concerned.

All incoming and outgoing passengers will mandatory carry PCR-based Covid-19 negative certificates and the test shall be done within 72 hours of the flight departure.

For outgoing flights from Dhaka, CAAB said there is no capacity restriction for narrow-bodied (single-isle) aircraft.

But all wide-bodied aircraft shall carry a maximum of 280 passengers. Boeing 777s and 747s could carry up to 320 passengers.

For incoming flights to Dhaka, CAAB set a limit of 100 passengers in the narrow-bodied aircraft and 150 passengers in wide-bodied ones, CAAB added.

All flights must leave at least the last row of economy class and one seat of business class empty for any suspected Covid-19 patients.

US-Bangla Airlines yesterday said they would start operating flight on Dhaka-Guangzhou route from April 24 with special permission of the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh.

The leading private airlines of the country will primarily operate flights once a week.



Authorities block a road near Dhaka Polytechnic Institute in the city's Tejgaon by placing rickshaws across. The photo was taken yesterday, the seventh day of the ongoing "strict lockdown".

PHOTO:
AMRAN HOSSAIN

Pandemic creates 2.45cr new poor

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The PPRC and the BIGD said over the last one year, a portion of the new poor was able to come out of poverty. Around 2.45 crore still suffer in poverty, they said.

"People have lost their capacity to face the pandemic and recover from the economic consequences of it. Income of households decreased while their debt kept going up," Zillur said while talking to The Daily Star later in the day.

The findings of the latest survey gives an indication that a large number of people are still struggling to lead their life smoothly, said Zillur, also an adviser to a former interim government.

"In order to protect the lives and livelihoods of people, we must avoid the economic shock we faced last year," he said.

"The impact of the ongoing economic hardship will deepen many folds if the country faces a similar shock this time," he said.

A smart Covid-19 lockdown can help in this case, but the authorities have to make sure that people's lives and livelihoods as well as health protocols are ensured simultaneously, he commented.

Participants at the briefing said the country was currently facing the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic amid incomplete, fragile economic recovery and a significant depletion of household incomes, which ultimately worsened people's capacity to fight Covid-19.

The survey also found that the rate of extreme poverty went up by 4 percent in March this year from February.

The consequence of the pandemic has had an adverse impact on the poor in urban areas as their per capita daily income declined to Tk 107 from Tk 124.

But the income of rural people increased to Tk 108 from Tk 106.

The rural economy has rebounded strongly sidestepping the economic hardship based on the good performance of the farm sector.

The survey also found that 27.3 percent of urban slum dwellers migrated from the major cities to villages after the arrival of the pandemic. Some 9.8 of the people are yet to return, it said.

In addition, the migration has not stopped till date as 6.8 percent of the people left urban areas since June last year.

Imran Matin, executive director of the BIGD, said the savings of the people have decreased largely at a time when they are burdened with huge debts.

Savings of each urban slum household stood at Tk 16,707 in March this year, down 11 percent from February last year, he said.

Reserves by people in rural areas also declined 24 percent in the last one year.

The amount of loans taken out per household in the city areas stood at Tk 42,961 in March this year, up 86 percent from February last year.

The scenario is the same for the rural areas where each household had Tk 58,101 in loans, up 75 percent from February last year.

Employment is also facing sluggishness as some 8 percent people, who were employed in February last year, were yet to manage any job till March this year. They are facing an uncertain situation, Imran said.

Two categories of the jobholders -- skilled labour and salaried jobs -- have struggled with their jobs to a large extent. Housemaids have faced the same consequence, the survey found.

The rise in unemployment compelled people to reduce their expenditure on food, according to the survey.

The food expenditure of each urban household surveyed has declined 17 percent from the pre-Covid stage when it was Tk 66 a day.

The expenditure on food in rural areas, however, increased by Tk 1 to Tk 53.

Against this backdrop, severe food insecurity has been on the rise as 2.3 percent households surveyed in the urban areas faced hunger the whole day at least once in this March when the ratio was 1 percent in rural areas, Imran said.

Females have been in the unemployment zone the most as the survey found 31 percent of the female respondents have lost their jobs in the last one year, he said.

Participation of the female labour force has been stuck in the last couple of years, so the authorities concerned should put emphasis on the issue, the participants said.

Hossain Zillur Rahman said 70 percent of the people surveyed faced a drop in their income just after the first wave of the pandemic.

The recovery of the economic hardship is highly fragile as a large

number of people have been unable to get back to their previous jobs, he said.

The increase in health and transport cost is also an indication of regulatory failures of the authorities concerned, he said.

The near absence of social protection is another crisis for the economy. People had to rely on their families and relatives to face their problems during the crisis.

Social protection taken by the government is playing only a "token role" in the Covid response, but it will have a large impact on the vulnerable groups as income capacity of the people declined massively, Hossain said.

The country has to address the second wave taking into account the depleted capacity of the people, he said.

Parallel to existing safety nets, specific new and significant programmes for the poor is highly important, he said.

Effective targeting is highly crucial in reaching out to the poor as there had been huge criticism about last year's measures taken by the government.

Mobile financial services can play a great role in providing the required government support to the vulnerable groups.

Agriculture has played a great role in tackling the first wave. A policy mindset shift towards strengthening rural regeneration and a holistic approach to supporting agriculture is a key lesson from the Covid crisis, he added.

The participants said that the rural economy has shown resilience significantly, meaning that the country's rural economy is much stronger than that of the urban areas. The income of rural people increased 1.9 percent in March from the pre-Covid-19 level.

Most of the people have been forced into joining unskilled jobs after the first wave.

The government should take an urgent national Cottage Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (CMSME) recovery action plan, which will help small enterprises turn around.

The macro sector (especially large borrowers) has mainly benefited from the stimulus packages, but the implementation rates of the incentive schemes dedicated to the middle economy (middle income groups) is not satisfactory, Hossain Zillur said.

Russia offers to sell 2.5cr shots

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export the vaccine and are willing to assist Bangladesh to produce the vaccine locally," the minister said.

Asked whether Bangladesh is capable of producing such a huge number of vaccine shots, Zahid said they inspected several local drug manufacturers who were capable enough to produce the vaccine.

"We are considering the proposal positively. We will start detailed negotiations on issues like terms and conditions, pricing and shipment."

The move comes amid an uncertainty over availability of vaccine shots from Serum Institute of India (SII).

With Serum failing to comply with an agreement to supply three crore jabs of Covishield to Bangladesh in six instalments, the Bangladesh government started exploring alternative sources for shots in a desperate attempt to continue the ongoing inoculation drive against novel coronavirus.

Russia approved the Sputnik V vaccine for domestic use in August last year.

India recently approved the use of Sputnik V as the country faces shortages of jabs amid an intensifying second wave of the deadly Covid-19 virus.

The health minister said apart from Russia, some local companies have already started discussions on importing vaccines manufactured by US drugmaker Moderna.

"We need vaccines. If we want to

inoculate 10 crore people, we need 20 crore doses. Even if it is one dose, we need at least 10 crore doses. This target can be achieved through initiatives at government-to-government or private level," he added.

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

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

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen in a recent interview with the state-run news agency BSS revealed the Russian proposal.

Russia proposed manufacturing its Sputnik V vaccine in Bangladesh in collaboration with local pharmaceuticals under a co-production arrangement, he said.

"We agreed with them on co-production... though it's not finalised yet."

As per the proposal, Russia will provide the technology and Bangladeshi pharmaceutical companies will produce the vaccine here, Momen said.

"If things go well, it will be cheap and hopefully it will be better," he added.

Ensure everyone gets vaccine

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The theme of the four-day annual BFA conference is: "A World in Change: Join Hands to Strengthen Global Governance and Advance Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Cooperation."

The conference started in Boao, a coastal resort in South China's Hainan province on Sunday and will continue till today.

Hasina said at these critical times the financial and technical supports to developing countries have also become more important.

She said developing countries need more access to the funds of the international financial institutions and the multinational development banks.

The PM said the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic are massive and are still unfolding. "It is, therefore, extremely important to strengthen the global and regional partnerships through coordinated efforts to address these challenges."

She said Bangladesh has been trying to mitigate the adverse impacts of the pandemic through balanced measures between life and livelihood.

"We have so far announced various stimulus packages worth \$14.6 billion, around 4.4 percent of our GDP, for social protection and boosting economy."

Hasina said the pandemic highlights the crucial role of global governance to ensure that no one is left behind even during a crisis.

She said Bangladesh is engaged in different regional connectivity initiatives through South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation (SASEC), Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) forum.

In this connection, the PM said Bangladesh is uniquely placed to connect the regions of South Asia,

Southeast Asia, East Asia and beyond through multi-modal linkages and it believes that Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) could play an important role in this regard.

"This continent has the advantage of huge demographic dividend, vast markets and the technological edge. If we join hands, together we can grow faster. This will also help us achieve the SDGs that we are all committed to fulfill," she added.

Hasina mentioned that Bangladesh is one of the most climate vulnerable countries.

Despite resource scarcity, Bangladesh has established a Climate Change Trust Fund of about \$450 million from own resources, she said. "We have been implementing various adaptation and mitigation programmes to offset the adverse impacts of climate change."

The premier said Bangladesh is the current president of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF). The country is also hosting the South Asian Regional Office of Global Centre for Adaptation which will work on disseminating local-based innovative adaptation strategies, she added.

The PM ended her speech recapping three points.

"Firstly, we need strong partnership among us to address the challenges posed by the pandemic, and to make vaccines available to everyone by declaring it as global public goods."

Secondly, she said, the countries need to work together for harnessing the power of technology.

Hasina said seamless physical and digital connectivity will be the key to reap the benefits of the Asian Century.

She said under the current state of globalisation, every country has to do its part for the common good. The nations and economies will have to look out for each other, as no single country in this world can sustain on its own.

The premier called upon all to think together, work together, and grow together.

Up against wall, Hefajat seeks to back down

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The two sides, however, agreed to hold more meetings soon, a Hefajat leader, who was present at the meeting, said wishing anonymity.

The leaders in the meeting said they want to bring an end to the "misunderstanding" that has arisen between the government and the organisations centring the protest that coincided with the celebrations of golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence.

They also requested reopening the Qawmi madrasas, which were closed upon government directives to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

In the meeting, Hefajat leaders insisted that the organisation is a non-political and will remain so.

Interestingly, Nurul Islam Jihadi, who was accused in a case filed with Paltan Police Station in connection with the violence at the Baitul Mukarram mosque on March 26, was present at the meeting with the home minister.

Asked about the meeting, Home Minister Asaduzzaman told this newspaper that it was not a formal meeting.

"They [Hefajat] just came to meet me and I spoke to them," he said. He refused to elaborate further.

Different madrasa authorities have already instructed its students not to join any kind of anti-government activities.

Anamul Hasan, hostel superintendent of a Qawmi madrasa in Brahmanbaria, told this newspaper that they have instructed their students to not join in any anti-government activities and political programmes.

"Our students will only protest if any

anti-Islamic activities take place," he added.

ARREST IS ON

A day after the meeting between the Hefajat delegation and the home minister, the drive to arrest its leaders was ongoing and around 10 people were arrested yesterday, including a Dhaka city Hefajat leader.

Maulana Korban Ali Kasemi, joint secretary general of Bangladesh Khilafah Majlis and also the vice-president of Hefajat-e-Islam Dhaka Mahanagar committee, was arrested by the Detective Branch (DB) of Gulshan Division Police from the capital's Bashoba area at 5:30pm.

Around 10 top leaders of Hefajat were also arrested by police for their involvement in the 2013 violence.

Besides, some 400 people, mostly supporters of Hefajat, were arrested from different parts of the country for their involvement in the violence between March 26 and 28 of this year.

Over 160 cases have been filed since 2013 till date centring violence involving Hefajat. The cases were against 1.30 lakh unnamed people.

MAMUNUL'S FIRST DAY IN REMAND Mamunul on the first day in police remand said he was forming a support group by criticising the PM and ruling party men through provocative statements.

He actually "wanted to be in power or achieved political post through these support groups", Harun-Or Rashid, deputy commissioner of Tejgaon Division Police, quoted Mamunul as saying.

Mamunul is now on a seven-day police remand.

DC Harun, while talking with The Daily Star yesterday, said, "Mamunul

actually had a kind of purpose. He wanted to seize state power by relying on Hefajat supporters."

CONFESSONAL STATEMENT

Hefajat's recent violence was aimed at toppling the government, Muhammad Ilias Hamidi, central assistant finance secretary of Hefajat, said in a confessional statement before the Dhaka Chief Judicial Magistrate's Court yesterday.

Ilias was placed before the court after the end of his five-day police remand in a case filed under the anti-terrorism act with Keraniganj Police Station. He was arrested on April 15 while holding an anti-government meeting at a house in Keraniganj.

Court sources said in his statement, Ilias said that Hefajat's protest against the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Bangladesh was planned.

Hefajat top leaders, including Mamunul Haque, Azizul Haque Islamabadi and others, were making provocative speeches at mahfils to incite madrasa students as a part of their bid to stage a major movement, reports our court correspondent.

Ilias further said he was at Baitul Mukarram when the violence began.

He said in the first week of April, the senior leaders of Hefajat met at the Hathazari madrasa in Chattagram and decided to topple the government using the excuse of violence at Baitul Mukarram, in Narayanganj and Brahmanbaria.

In his statement, Ilias identified Hefajat Amir Junayed Babunagari, Mamunul Haque and a few other leaders as the main instigators.

The court sent him to jail after recording his statement.

UK to cut emissions by more than three-quarters by 2035: reports

AFP, Londres

Britain will ramp up its commitment to cut carbon emissions ahead of hosting a UN climate summit this year, vowing a 78 percent reduction by 2035, reports said yesterday.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson is set to unveil later this week the legally-binding target, which is 15 years earlier than once planned, the BBC reported.

It said that for the first time the commitment will also cover emissions from international aviation and shipping, a long-standing demand of environmental activists.

It comes ahead of the UK staging COP26, the United Nation's annual climate gathering, in Glasgow in November.

On Thursday, Johnson will address a climate summit hosted by US President Joe Biden, as he attempts to make Britain a world leader on the issue in the run-up to November.

The country has set a target of becoming carbon neutral by mid-century and has already ramped up its targets.

In December, Britain said it will cut its greenhouse gas emissions by more than two-thirds, compared to 1990 levels, by 2030 -- one of the most ambitious aims of any major economy.

The latest 78 percent target for the middle of the next decade was among the recommendations made last year by the UK government's independent advisory body, the Committee on Climate Change (CCC).

Lockdown

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for approval following a meeting held virtually between secretaries of different ministries and business association leaders.

The duration of the ongoing restriction has been extended from April 21 midnight to April 28 midnight. Special flights and banking activities will operate as they have during the restrictions from April 14.

As per the circular, all public and private offices will stay closed and all modes of transport will remain suspended.

Nobody is allowed to go outdoors unless there is an emergency such as buying medicine and essentials or taking treatment.

Meanwhile, in a separate notice, the cabinet division asked the finance division to take steps to open accounts offices.

"Due to the closure of accounts offices at the field level, development and regular activities of the government at different levels are being hampered," reads the notice signed by Rezaul Islam, a deputy secretary.

The current fiscal year is about to end and considering the situation, it is requested to open divisional, district and upazila accounts offices on a limited scale, according to the notice.

Meanwhile, the National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) on Covid-19 in its 31st meeting held virtually on Sunday night suggested another week-long strict lockdown to contain the rapid spread of coronavirus, according to a press release from the committee.

The press release said the experts expressed satisfaction over the current lockdown and recommended formulation of a plan to lift the restrictions in phases.

Positivity rate

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the important parameters to measure the level of virus transmission in any area.

According to the World Health Organization, the transmission of the virus would be considered under control if the positivity rate remains below five percent for three weeks.

Throughout January and February, the positivity rate remained below five percent as the virus transmission declined to its lowest. It had its peak in June and July last year.

The country, however, saw the second wave as the positivity rate started rising again from the second week of March, leading the government to impose the ongoing countrywide movement restrictions.

In those 24 hours yesterday, 91 people died of Covid and 4,559 people tested positive for the virus, raising the tally of deaths to 10,588 and confirmed cases to 7,27,780, according to a DGHS press release.

Yesterday's death toll was also lower than that of the previous few days.

On Monday, 112 people died, which was the highest so far in a day while 102 died on Sunday. On Friday and Saturday, the number was 101.

The death rate is now 1.45 percent. In the same 24 hours, 6,811 Covid-19 patients recovered.

The total number of recoveries is 6,28,111 and the recovery rate is 86.31 percent.

Among the 91 deceased, 58 were men and 33 were women.

Of them, one was between 11-20 years old; seven were within 31-40 years old; 11 between 41-50; 18 within 51-60; and 54 were above 60 years old, added the release.