

PDs of 63 RHD projects

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water resources, and housing and public works.

"The prime minister termed it 'worrying' and gives directives to take immediate action," reads the IMED document, citing the PMO letter.

Following the directives, the railways ministry has changed directors of 17 projects of Bangladesh Railway on February 22, the last day to inform the PMO about the measures taken by respective ministries.

RHD FACES DIFFERENT REALITY

RHD is responsible for the construction and maintenance of the major road and bridge network in the country, which sees major growth in this sector in the last decade.

There are 22,362 km of national and regional highways and district roads -- of which, 3,943km are national highways, according to the 2019-20 annual report of RHD.

Besides, RHD is now implementing around 200 development projects and it is not possible to appoint a separate director for each project with its existing manpower, RHD officials said.

There are some 220 to 230 officials -- from executive engineer to additional chief engineers (including current charge) -- in RHD, who are eligible to be PD.

But, many of them have particular jobs and mega projects require around 10 such officials, they said, adding that in this given situation, it is not possible to give separate PD for each project.

RHD is now implementing 20 mega projects currently, as mentioned on the website of the road transport and highway division.

In this given situation, the road transport and bridges ministry, RHD, and the project-related committee of the government held several meetings to find out a solution regarding the prime minister's directive, sources at

the ministry said.

"We have received several directives in this regard and changes of PDs is a part of the process to implement prime minister's directives," an official of the ministry told The Daily Star wishing not to be named.

He said they even appointed an official from RHD headquarters as PD of projects under Mymensingh zone, which indicates their intention to implement PM's directive, he said.

Usually, a project under a particular zone has a PD from that particular zone, he added.

Contacted, AKM Manir Hossain Pathan, additional chief engineer (planning and maintenance wing), said the changes were brought to reduce pressure on some particular officials.

Replying to a question, he said the work dynamic of RHD is quite different from many other agencies.

He said each RHD zone has a particular setup led by an additional chief engineer and comprising with other officials and used to implement projects as a whole unit and who is project director matters very little.

Replying to another question, Manir said although the scope of work at the department has increased manifold in the last two decades, their manpower has not increased accordingly.

He, however, said they have sought additional manpower.

As per the existing organogram, RHD has 9,430 posts including 624 posts under cadre services. However, many posts remained vacant, RHD sources.

RHD submitted an organogram of 22,000 manpower, of which 1,992 would come through BCS, they said.

If the new manpower is approved and recruited, then it would be possible to appoint separate PD for each project, they added.



A volunteer sprays disinfectant to sanitize a wholesale grain market amidst rising Covid-19 cases, in Amritsar, India yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Bangladesh goes from 151st

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infrastructure and the transparency of the institutions and procedures that affect the production of news and information.

Countries are scored under these indicators based on a set of questions, which include queries that ask what political and religious factors prevent the creation of independent, privately owned media, whether the process for granting TV and radio licences is transparent, and whether the government can pressurise advertisers to favour certain media.

Other questions include whether the practice of journalism is discouraged based on gender, whether the media is language diverse, and whether it encourages recruitment of ethnic minorities.

"Does the government monitor or threaten journalists?" and "Do journalists practise self-censorship for the fear of civil lawsuits or criminal prosecution; threats to physical safety

of the journalist or their family and friends, to their workplace or their home; professional reprisals or attacks on reputation?" are questions that are asked.

The index also evaluates whether journalists receive invitations to luxury events, press trips and other benefits of all kinds that would weaken their publications' objectivity.

Conflict of interest in media ownership is one of the many questions being asked. "What proportion of general-interest media is owned by companies with other interests in non-media sectors of the economy?" the organisation asked when evaluating a country.

"Translated into 20 languages, including English, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Indonesian and Korean, the questionnaire is sent to journalists, media lawyers, researchers and other media specialists selected by RSF in the 180 countries and regions covered by the Index," stated the methodology

section.

"Journalism is the best vaccine against disinformation," RSF secretary-general Christophe Deloire said.

"Unfortunately, its production and distribution are too often blocked by political, economic, technological and, sometimes, even cultural factors. In response to the virality of disinformation across borders, on digital platforms and via social media, journalism provides the most effective means of ensuring that public debate is based on a diverse range of established facts."

Norway topped the index for the fifth year in a row while Eritrea was placed in the bottom.

The World Press Freedom Index found that journalism was "totally blocked or seriously impeded" in 73 countries, while it was "constrained" in 59 others.

Many governments had used the pandemic to worsen repression, the report said.

India suffers worst day

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protocols than official Covid-19 death tolls, according to crematorium and cemetery workers, the media and a review of government data.

The crisis in hospitals has left people fighting for beds, oxygen and medicines, and doctors said the shortages will inevitably lead to more deaths.

"The huge pressure on hospitals and the health system right now will mean that a good number who would have recovered had they been able to access hospital services may die," said Gautam I. Menon, a professor at Ashoka University.

Yesterday, the health ministry reported 259,170 new infections, a sixth day over 200,000 and getting closer to the peak of nearly 300,000 seen in the United States in January.

Delhi High Court slammed Centre over Covid-19 crisis in the country saying "people will have blood on their hands", if medicines and resources are diverted without application of mind, reports TNN.

VACCINATIONS DRAG
Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi - who has also addressed Congress party election rallies in recent weeks - said he had tested positive for the virus.

The hardest-hit western state of Maharashtra announced fresh curbs, restricting opening times for grocery shops and vendors to just four hours a day.

Further north, the capital city Delhi suffered a record overnight death toll following a surge in infections, and began a six-day lockdown late on Monday.

Media reports said the city's Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal had gone into isolation after his wife tested positive.

People in Delhi and towns of the

populous northern state of Uttar Pradesh put out desperate calls for help on Twitter, asking for assistance getting their families into hospitals. Others reported dire shortages of oxygen and the anti-viral drug Remdesivir.

Unicef told Reuters yesterday issues related to the ramp-up of the AstraZeneca shot outside India for supplies to the COVAX vaccine-sharing facility have been resolved, saying it should receive 65 million doses by end-May.

Meanwhile, the European Medicines Agency said yesterday the Johnson & Johnson Covid-19 vaccine has possible links to rare blood clot incidents, but reiterated that its benefits still outweighed the risks.

VACCINE PASSPORTS
In the US, the state department is to advise Americans to avoid 80 percent of countries worldwide because of the pandemic.

The state department said its decision to update its travel advisories was to bring it more in line with those from the CDC and "does not imply a reassessment of the current health situation in a given country".

The World Health Organization's emergency committee said Monday it was against international travellers being required to have proof of vaccination, partly on grounds such as a measure would deepen inequities, reports AFP.

"Do not require proof of vaccination as a condition of entry, given the limited (although growing) evidence about the performance of vaccines in reducing transmission and the persistent inequity in the global vaccine distribution," the committee said in a statement summarising its April 15 meeting, the results of which were only published on Monday.

Fleeing by the thousands

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elected leaders and repression of the majority of its population in East Pakistan is strictly "an internal matter".

It termed the US policy as dangerously short-sighted and wrote: A particularly heavy burden of responsibility falls on the United States Government since Washington's arms provide the principal muscle of West Pakistan's military power and American economic aid will become increasingly crucial for the Pakistani Government's survival. Continued blind backing for the military regime in Islamabad can only lead to disaster for this country's substantial interests on the Indian subcontinent.

New York Times also criticised the Pakistan government for making the conflict an international issue by attempting to place the blame for Bangalee resistance on neighboring India. It warned that mounting tensions between India and Pakistan could explode into a war that might quickly involve one or more of the major powers. The newspaper urged United Nations Security Council and its member states to do all that was in their power to try to forestall such a development.

JUSTICE CHOWDHURY APPOINTED SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE
Acting President Syed Nazrul Islam, on behalf of the Mujibnagar Government, today appointed Justice Abu Sayed Chowdhury as the special representative of the Government of Bangladesh for presenting and

receiving communication to and from foreign countries, various heads of states, diplomatic missions abroad, United Nations organisations and other international bodies.

'BANGLADESH WILL BE ONE OF WORLD'S WORST HEADACHES'

In a backchannel message to the US President's Assistant for National Security Affairs Henry Kissinger, Joseph Farland, the US Ambassador to Pakistan, provided the following assessment on the future of the East Pakistan crisis: "East Pakistan, having become a garrison state, will eventually bring about the dissolution of Pakistan as it now exists. When this will happen or in what manner it will happen is only a guess; economic stresses will weigh heavily in the balance on both questions. In the interim, India can be expected to develop systematic program of infiltration and arms aid. Guerrilla warfare is virtually assured, but the extent of it is yet uncertain. Internationally, Bangla Desh advocates will make use of all public and private forums. If and when Bangla Desh becomes a reality, it will be one of world's worst headaches, having little economic or bureaucratic infrastructure and virtually no natural resources to build upon. It is unbelievable, but in an area about the size of Louisiana, the population is expected to reach 200-275 million in the year 2000."

Shamsudoza Sajen is a journalist and researcher. He can be contacted at sajen1986@gmail.com

Jannat doing better after surgery

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Doctors had decided to carry out the operation after it was confirmed through various check-ups.

Sultana Begum, the child's mother, said her daughter's condition has improved, and her blood dysentery has already stopped.

While visiting the hospital yesterday, this correspondent found the child on a bed at post-operative room of paediatric ward.

Tarek Islam, the father, said he got massive responses from philanthropists across the country after this newspaper ran a report on their rickshaw journey to Rangpur from Thakurgaon.

Even, an anonymous person from Dhaka has paid all the expenses of his daughter's surgery, said the father.

Besides the philanthropists, deputy commissioners of Rangpur and Thakurgaon also enquired about the treatment progress of his daughter and assured him of all kinds of medical support for his daughter.

Tarek, a father of three daughters, said he admitted his youngest daughter to Thakurgaon General Hospital on April 13 when she had severe blood dysentery. As doctors did not see any improvement of her condition, they referred her to RMCH next day.

The father, a rickshaw puller in Thakurgaon town, said he tried his best to arrange an ambulance to take his daughter Jannat to RMCH, but failed as the charge was beyond his cash in hand. Besides, there was no alternative arrangement due to the

countrywide lockdown.

"Finally, I took the handle of my rickshaw to take her to RMCH," said the father.

Tarek started his 110km journey early Saturday morning. It took him around nine hours to reach the hospital in Rangpur. "I never visited Rangpur before, and it was new to me and my family," he said.

He added that the battery of his rickshaw died halfway into their journey. Later, another easy-bike driver helped him pull his vehicle for 10km. Fort the rest of the road, the rickshaw needed either push or pull to reach the hospital, he said.

"We are now quite happy as my daughter is recovering," said Tarek, thanking the people's support and the doctors.

Oxygen supply stretched to limit

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Saiqa Mazed, a spokesperson of Linde Bangladesh, told The Daily Star, "The demand for medical oxygen in Covid hospitals has almost doubled of late. To meet this demand, we are now giving more priority to producing medical oxygen than industrial oxygen."

She said they provide oxygen support to all government hospitals and some of the largest private hospitals in Bangladesh which need uninterrupted oxygen supply at the intensive care units (ICUs).

Asked whether they are facing any scarcity, she said, "In a sense, we are in dearth..."

"We have two oxygen plants in Narayanganj and Chattogram which produce 90 tonnes oxygen per day. Earlier the ratio of medical and industrial oxygen was like 60:40. The demand for industrial oxygen did not decrease, but the demand for medical oxygen has increased to 80 percent, so the ratio now is 80:20."

"That's why, we are giving priority to producing medical oxygen by decreasing the production of industrial oxygen," Saiqa added.

Linde Bangladesh, which has an oxygen plant in India, has also been bringing in oxygen from India using tankers and delivering it to hospitals to meet demand.

"On top of our total production, we are trying to get 20 percent more oxygen from India," Saiqa Mazed said.

Recently, India imposed a ban on industrial oxygen supply from April 22 to meet its huge demand.

Asked whether it would affect the supply in Bangladesh, the Linde spokesperson said, "So far, we are not facing any problem. As Linde has an oxygen plant in India, it gets an inter-company transfer."

"Even if the Indian government stops it, then ideally, a government-to-government arrangement should be there," she said.

Sources said other than Linde, a few other oxygen supplying companies

which have been importing oxygen from India are facing challenges as they are now getting half of what they used to get earlier.

Mustain Billah, chief executive officer of Islam Oxygen Ltd, said they earlier used to import 30 tonnes of oxygen per week from India. Now it has been decreased to 15 tonnes due to increasing demand there.

He said the demand for medical oxygen has increased so sharply that they stopped producing industrial oxygen 20 days ago.

"We produce 28,000 cubic metres of oxygen per day. The entire production capacity is now dedicated to medical oxygen," he said.

An official of Spectra Oxygen, wishing not to be named, said they produce 25 tonnes of medical oxygen per day.

The demand has increased now. Earlier, 60 percent of our machines used to cater to the demand for medical oxygen. Now, we are producing medical oxygen by dedicating all our machines for 24 hours," he said.

The country has been witnessing a rapid surge in deaths and infections from Covid-19 with hospitals struggling to tackle the ever-increasing spike of patients with their current ICU capacity and stock of ventilators.

Dhaka Medical College Hospital Director Brig Gen Md Nazmul Haque said although they have not yet faced any crisis of oxygen supply, the demand has increased sharply.

"In central oxygen supply, the 20,000 cubic metre tank used to go empty in three days, now it empties in two," he said.

Apart from central oxygen supply, DMCH also has 700 cylinders to support emergency patients, he said.

Asim Kumar Nath, director of Mugda Medical College Hospital, told The Daily Star yesterday that the demand for oxygen has increased by 40 percent in the last month.

The oxygen supply company is filling up the 12,000 cubic metre tank

every day [at Mugda Hospital], he said, adding, "Almost every patient getting admitted to the hospital is in need of oxygen."

The authorities of New Life Hospital Ltd on Green Road said they need 20 percent more than the oxygen they are currently getting to fulfil demand.

With cylinders, a patient can be given oxygen at the maximum rate of six litres per minute. A central oxygen supply can provide much more oxygen in an uninterrupted manner, depending on supply of liquid oxygen.

There is a daily demand of 180 tonnes of oxygen for hospitals and other related industries, according to officials of oxygen supplying companies.

Linde Bangladesh produces and supplies about 90 tonnes of oxygen daily and Spectra Oxygen Ltd about 25 tonnes.

Linde and Spectra mostly supply liquid oxygen in tanks to government hospitals while they provide oxygen in cylinders to some private hospitals.

Besides, some small local companies -- Islam, Meghna and Abul Khair -- also produce oxygen on a small scale.

Apart from hospitals, there is a demand for cylinders at the retail market as a section of people is buying cylinders just in case someone in the family tests positive for Covid-19 and experience breathing problems.

Farid Hossain Miah, director (hospitals and clinics) at the DGHs, said, "We are still not facing problems but if the number of patients continues to rise, we may face problems."

"We are in constant talks with suppliers. We have asked them to raise their production, and urged the authorities concerned to give top priority to medical oxygen," he said.

Tapen Sengupta, deputy managing director of Bangladesh Steel Re-Rolling Mills Ltd, said they were still getting adequate supply of industrial oxygen.

"If there is any shortage in supply in future, it will definitely affect steel manufacturing," he said.

Tigers' quest

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Rahim and Mominul as the batting department has been very vulnerable in recent times.

From a bowling perspective, skipper Mominul hinted that the visitors will bank on pavers for the first Test with three pacers -- Abu Jayed, Ebadot Hossain and Taskin Ahmed -- likely to feature alongside the two spinners -- Taijul Islam and Mehedi Hasan Miraz.

The pitch at the Pallekele stadium, though, has favoured spinners in the last two Tests played in 2017 and 2018, with the spinners of visiting India and England team dominating the hosts to seal victories.

Sri Lanka, too, will be desperate to return to winning ways since losing to England 2-0 at home after suffering an away series defeat against South Africa. However, skipper Dimuth Karunaratne and his troop gained some confidence as they managed to draw the two Tests in West Indies in their last series.

Bangladesh's Test record against Sri Lanka has remained disappointing with only one win and sixteen defeats in twenty encounters and the Tigers will want to improve on those stats this time around.

Youth held over

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-- along with another unknown accused allegedly gang raped the woman. The alleged rapists released her around 1:00pm yesterday, they said.

The victim then went straight to Sreepur Police Station and filed the rape case against the five men. Police later arrested Sultan, said Md. Golam Sarwar, inspector (operations) of the police station.

A court sent Sultan to jail after he was produced before it. The woman was sent to a hospital for medical examination, he added.

Farmers in haor

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facing any crisis of labour this time. Furthermore, many affluent farmers are using combine harvesters to smoothen their harvesting, said Abdus Shakur Saadi, agriculture extension officer in Netrakona's Mohanganj upazila.

Combine harvester is a versatile machine for reaping, threshing, and winnowing.

A machine can reap an acre of land per hour and the harvest cost by the machine is one fourth than that of manual labour, said Saadi.

Boro paddy was grown in around 185,000 hectares of land in Netrakona. Around 60 percent paddy has already been harvested, said Habibur Rahman, deputy director of the district's agricultural extension department.

Besides, the paddy was cultivated on 166,000 hectares in Kishoreganj. Around 20 percent paddy has been reaped, said Saiful Alam, DD of DAE in the district.

Along with the bumper production, farmers are getting fair prices of their produce.

"This year, we are selling our Boro paddy between Tk 830 to Tk 850 a maund. The price was Tk 750-770 last year," said farmer Mozammel in Netrakona's Khaliajuri.

Another farmer Zilur Rahman of Moisharkandi area in Kishoreganj's Mithamoin upazila echoed with Mozammel.

Talking to this correspondent, several DAE officials said they were providing all kinds of support to farmers for yielding good production and getting fair prices.

Police officer in Capitol riot died from stroke: coroner

AFP, Washington

The police officer who died following the attack on the US Capitol by supporters of president Donald Trump in January was killed by two strokes, the Washington city coroner ruled Monday.

Brian Sicknick was one of five people, and the only police officer, who died in direct connection to the January 6 insurrection, when hundreds of pro-Trump rioters attacked and overran police to force their way into the seat of US government, shutting the building down.

Initial reports, later ruled incorrect, said Sicknick had been hit by a fire extinguisher. Later reports tied his death to being sprayed with chemical irritants like bear spray or pepper spray.

But the city's Office of the Chief Medical Examiner ruled Monday that Sicknick, 42, had died from "natural" causes.

The official report attributed the Capitol Police officer's death to "acute brainstem and cerebellar infarcts due to acute basilar artery thrombosis" -- a particularly devastating form of stroke with a high death rate, caused by blockages in the brain.

It noted that he had been sprayed with a chemical substance at about 2:20 pm during the assault on Congress. At 10:00 pm, he collapsed at the Capitol and was taken to the hospital. Almost 24 hours later he died while still in the hospital.