

BANGLADESH UPDATE

4,280
New cases in 24hrs

7,32,060
Total cases

10,683
Deaths

6,35,183
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

3,065,669
Deaths

144,223,631
Total cases

PM allocates Tk 10.50cr for pandemic affected poor

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday allocated Tk 10.50 crore for district deputy commissioners to provide assistance to the poor, distressed and insolvent people who were affected due to the ongoing lockdown.

"The assistance has been provided from the Prime Minister's Relief and Welfare Fund," said PM's Press Secretary Ihsanul Karim.

He said the DCs would provide assistance after preparing lists of the poor, distressed and insolvent people who were affected most by the ongoing lockdown.

The amount of the allotted money will vary depending on the number of poor, distressed and insolvent people in particular districts.

Ihsanul also said all DCs of 64 districts would get the share of the allotted money.

On April 18, the PM declared that the government would provide financial assistance to some 36 lakh families who were hit hard by the pandemic and recent natural disasters.

The families include 35 lakh low-income ones hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic, and the rest one lakh are farmers affected by recent natural disasters.

An amount of Tk 2,500 will be provided as cash support to 35 lakh families, while Tk 5,000 each will be given to one lakh families of farmers.

The government will spend Tk 930 crore to disburse cash among 36 lakh families.

Out of 30,94,249 hectares of cropland in 36 districts, crop on 10,301 hectares was completely



destroyed, while crop on 59,327 hectares was partially damaged due to strong winds, hailstorms and cyclones on April 4. Some 100,000 farmers were directly affected due to the recent disaster, according to the data of the Department of Agricultural Extension.

In the wake of the second wave of coronavirus, the government has enforced lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus.

PM'S EID GIFT FOR OVER 1M FAMILIES

bKash, a mobile money platform, will distribute the cash aid of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to 10,50,000 low-income families affected by Covid-19.

In a unique initiative of the PM to stand by families who have lost their livelihood, financial aid of Tk 2,500 will be provided to each of them before Eid, bKash said in a media release yesterday.

The money is being disbursed digitally with transparency, swiftness and security to the real victims through verification of NID cards, it said.

During the month of Ramadan and the Eid festival, this money will bring relief to the families and help them greatly in case of emergency, bKash said.

The beneficiary will not need to bear any Cash Out charge.

The government will pay Tk 15 from the total Cash Out charge, while the remaining Tk 31.25 will be borne by bKash.

Last year, bKash successfully distributed the cash aid of the PM to nearly 1 million families.



Unsold goods and other possessions of street vendors covered in plastic sheets are left on the footpath in front of Baitul Mukarram mosque in the capital. Coronavirus restrictions have forced the vendors, who usually enjoy brisk trade in Ramadan, to leave their shops like this.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

ICU bed, ventilator ever more elusive

FROM PAGE 1

nasal cannulas against 8 ICU beds. Comfort Hospital also had as many ventilators as ICU beds.

But The Daily Star visited over 16 private hospitals in Dhaka and found that the number of ICU beds do not match the number of life-saving equipment, like ventilators.

To be fair, the ventilator crisis is acute all over the world and the sheer scale of the demand was first felt when the pandemic began last year.

But then, a year has gone by and the reality still has not changed.

"We have 10 ICU beds for Covid patients, five ventilators and six high-flow nasal cannulas," said Mir Omar Faruk, manager (hospital and business development) of Hi-Care General Hospital in Uttara. Every day, the hospital receives up to 15 calls -- all seeking an ICU bed, but they can rarely be accommodated.

"A patient who has been trying for three days just got admitted," said Faruk yesterday.

Around the area lies Shin-Shin General Hospital, which has six ICU beds and two ventilators, but no high-flow nasal cannulas, said its manager Md Zahidul Islam. "If the patient suddenly needs a ventilator and one is not free, they ask us for options, we refer them elsewhere."

Also in the general vicinity, Crescent Hospital has 25 ICU beds, but only 10 ventilators and 10 high-flow nasal cannulas, according to the information desk of the hospital.

At Dhanmondi Clinic on Green Road, a large ICU exists with 17 beds, informed the department in-charge. However, the number of ventilators is seven while the hospital is stocked with five high-flow nasal cannulas.

At Cure Specialised Hospital on Bijoy Sarani, one can find eight ICU beds, but there are five ventilators and

five high-flow nasal cannulas against those beds, said Rabiul Alam Shahin, the assistant director in charge of the hospital's administration.

When asked about the mismatch, he said, "We have closed off an entire operation theatre to accommodate this ICU simply thinking about the current crisis."

Every day, the hospital gets up to 20 calls. It cannot cater to the callers' needs. Last week, when the hospital was visited, there was a backlog of two patients from the ward.

New Life Hospital has 10 ICU beds with eight ventilators and four high flow nasal cannulas, said the hospital's manager (HR & Admin) Mostafizur Rahman.

On the other hand, Padma General Hospital's six ICU beds are equipped with four ventilators and three high-flow nasal cannulas, informed the hospital's manager Md Salim Reza. "We get up to 20 calls a day but it is impossible to help them. Once a bed empties, it takes a maximum of 2-3 hours for it to get filled up."

AMZ hospital has 10 ICU beds and eight ventilators and high-flow nasal cannulas. "We get over 200 calls every day from patients seeking ICU beds. Our wards have between 2-4 patients each day needing the ICU," said the person in charge of the information desk at the hospital.

Better Life Hospital has 24 ICU beds but has 12 ventilators and only two high flow nasal cannulas, said Tanvir Uddin Ahmed, the hospital's deputy director.

At Dhanmondi General and Kidney Hospital, seven ICU beds have five ventilators and two high-flow nasal cannulas, said their Director of Administration Shameem Mahboob.

"If a bed does not have a ventilator, it is not an ICU bed. There needs to be as many ventilators as

beds," stated Debrata Banik, the president of Bangladesh Society of Anaesthesiologists, and professor at the department of anesthesia, analgesia and intensive care medicine at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University.

Almost all the private hospitals visited said that they do not stock more ventilators because not all intensive care patients need mechanical ventilators. However, many experts disagree.

"A patient can deteriorate at any time without prior notice. Not only must an ICU bed have a ventilator, there must also be spares in case one stops working," said Shahjad Hossain Masum, department in charge of the ICU at Kurmitola General Hospital.

"High-flow nasal cannulas are also necessary. First, we have to try to oxygenate the patient with non-invasive ventilation using high-flow nasal cannulas and when that fails we have to go for mechanical ventilation," said Banik.

The problem of not having enough high-flow nasal cannulas was acutely felt by the family of a female patient, who was receiving treatment at an ICU at the one of the hospitals mentioned above.

The patient -- who died on April 10 -- had to be intubated directly when her oxygen saturation levels fell because the ICU did not have enough high-flow nasal cannulas, alleged her family.

"We consulted external doctors to understand whether our mother really needed life support and all of them said she should have been given non-invasive ventilation first," said the son of the patient.

Since the patient's family requested anonymity, this report is also refraining from mentioning the hospital's name.

Matua votes may turn out

FROM PAGE 1

Communist Party of India (Marxist) bagged four. The BJP, on the other hand, failed to manage even one.

At that election, the TMC won 44.89 percent votes, Congress and CPIM alliance got 39.24 percent votes, while the BJP secured only 10.74 percent votes.

But in the 2019 Lok Sabha election, the BJP delivered a devastating blow to Congress and CPIM by getting 40.85 percent of votes. The Congress and CPIM alliance got only 13.46 percent votes. The vote ratio of the TMC had also decreased from 44.89 percent to 42.58 percent.

But BJP has now emerged as the TMC's main opponent, leaving Congress and CPIM into a distant third in the race for polls.

According to the Lok Sabha polls, the TMC is marching ahead in 24 assembly seats, while the BJP is ahead in 19.

In this phase, both the TMC and BJP have nominated strong candidates in all the 43 assembly seats, contested by 306 candidates. Congress on the other hand has fielded 12 candidates,

while its partner CPIM has put up 23 candidates and another partner Indian Secular Front (ISF) will be contesting in two seats.

Senior BJP leaders like Mukul Roy is contesting from Krishnanagar Uttar and Rahul Sinha from Habra. Sitting MLAs of the Samyukt Morcha, Ali Imran Ramz of All India Forward Bloc, is contesting from Chakulia in Uttar Dinajpur and Tanmoy Bhattacharya of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) from Dum Dum Uttar. CPM leader and Food Minister of Mamata Banerjee's cabinet Jyotipriyo Mullick is contesting from Habra while film director, actor and producer Raju Chakraborty is contesting from the Barrackpore constituency under TMC's banner.

Over 1.03 crore voters are eligible to cast their votes and a total 1,071 companies of central forces deployed to guard at 14,480 polling stations.

Elections have been held in 180 constituencies so far and the remaining 114 seats are set to go to polls between April 22 and 29. Votes will be counted on May 2.

Leaders Summit on Climate

FROM PAGE 1

Xi Jinping, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau are expected to attend the event.

Leaders from climate vulnerable countries, including Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bhutanese Prime Minister Lotay Tshering and Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, will also join the summit which is likely to start in the evening Bangladesh time. It will be streamed live for public viewing.

"A key goal of both the Leaders Summit and COP26 will be to catalyse efforts that keep that 1.5-degree goal within reach," said the White House in a statement.

At the summit, the US is likely to present its plan to cut emissions this decade and seek tougher commitments from the biggest emitting nations.

Climate experts see the summit as an important one before the COP26 to be held in November in Glasgow as the US has returned to the Paris Climate Agreement from which Biden's predecessor Donald Trump pulled out.

To mobilise support, Biden's Special Envoy for Climate John Kerry has recently visited a number of countries, including Bangladesh, India, the United Arab Emirates and China.

"Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will speak as president of the Climate Vulnerable Forum. At the same time, she will also raise the issues concerning Bangladesh," said a foreign ministry official in Dhaka.

Bangladesh will demand the major carbon emitting countries keep the global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius and implement the Paris Agreement, he said.

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen said, "We want developed countries to keep their commitment to mobilising \$100 billion a year as committed in the Paris Agreement from 2020. So far, very small portion of it is being mobilised."

He said so far a majority of the fund is being used for mitigation,

but Bangladesh wants 50 percent of it allocated for mitigation and the rest for adaptation.

Bangladesh would also seek technology transfer for renewable energy.

"Until now, we mostly depend on foreign equipment, engineers and technicians for our renewable energy projects. There should be measures to make sure we have technologies at cheap prices and we have the capacity for management of such projects," a foreign ministry official said.

Bangladesh does not have much potentials in hydroelectricity, which Nepal and Bhutan have.

"We would want the US to come and help in the regional hydroelectricity projects so we can increase our share of renewable energy to the total power generation," he said.

According to the White House, the summit will highlight examples of how enhanced climate ambition will create good paying jobs, advance innovative technologies, and help vulnerable countries adapt to climate impacts.

It will announce an ambitious 2030 emissions target as its new Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement.

Joe Biden will also urge leaders to use the summit as an opportunity to outline how their countries also will contribute to stronger climate ambition.

The summit will discuss opportunities to strengthen capacity to protect lives and livelihoods from the impacts of climate change and address the role of nature-based solutions in achieving net zero by 2050 goals.

Pete Ogden of the UN Foundation described the summit as "the most anticipated global climate moment since the Paris Agreement" was adopted in 2015, reports news portal climatechange.gov.com.

"This summit is not an end-point, but it is a very important opportunity for re-alignment [with the Paris goals] and to make some real progress. The US and their [2030 climate plan] being a part of that," he said.

Fragile embankments put lives at risk

FROM PAGE 1

million, according to the study.

The risks loom large as the proportion of people living below the absolute poverty line is higher in the coastal regions, where salinity intrusion made vast areas of land uncultivable, while the calamities displaced hundreds of thousands of people.

Although fatalities declined from 5 lakh in 1970 and 1.4 lakh in 1991 to some 4,000 in the last two decades due to improved early warning systems and the presence of 12,000 cyclone shelters, the material damages of cyclones were enormous. The damages from five major cyclones between 2007 and 2020 totalled around \$4 billion.

Only after the Cyclones Sidr in 2007 and Aila in 2009, the government obtained loans from the World Bank for the Coastal Embankment Improvement Project (CEIP) to improve over 400 kilometres of embankments of 10 polders in Bagerhat, Khulna, Satkhira, Barguna, Patuakhali and Pirojpur in the first phase.

"The project scheduled to begin in 2013 actually started in 2015. Its progress is about 65 percent now," Syed Hasan Imam, project director of CEIP, told this correspondent on April 18.

He said land acquisition, social and environmental impact assessments, resettlement issues took longer than usual, delaying the implementation. New technologies, including geo-bags and geo-tubes, are also being used in the embankments as required.

Besides, the Department of Forest is also planting trees on the banks to enhance sustainability. There are also local water associations to supervise the flushing and drainage sluices, he said.

He said the WDB repairs embankments on an individual case basis after damages or in cases

where they become vulnerable, but the CEIP is the first mega project to strengthen the embankments with higher quality in terms of design and implementation.

After the first phase, the government is now discussing with development partners the second phase of CEIP to improve 20 other polders. Besides, the government has also proposed that the Public-Private Partnership Authority construct two super dykes -- one from Mirsharai of Chattogram to Cox's Bazar and the other along the coastal parts of Feni, Noakhali and Lakshmipur to protect the region from tidal surges. The construction of these super dykes will require Tk 67,000 crore.

"The polders and super dykes cannot stop the damage from the cyclones, but can reduce it to a great extent," Hasan Imam said. This will allow the farmers to do cultivation, which can significantly increase food production.

Water experts say all the 139 polders should be improved, including increasing heights depending on the projections of sea level rise and there should be a master plan and a clear funding mechanism.

Syed Aminul Hoque, director of COAST Foundation that works in the coastal region, said previous experiences suggest that bureaucratic red tape, irregularities in repairing embankments and purposeful destruction of those by shrimp farmers have left the polders in bad shape.

"What we need is strong and sustainable embankments and then their regular maintenance," said Brac University Professor Emeritus Dr Ainun Nishat.

Local communities and local government can be involved for maintaining embankments and in that case, how the local government can get the funds needs to be fixed, he said.

The WDB is good for constructing the embankments, but not in

maintenance, the water expert added.

Ainun Nishat said the government is implementing the CEIP with loan from the World Bank, but as a climate victim, the country should get it as grants from sources like Green Climate Fund that should be annually \$120 billion from 2020 as per the Paris Agreement.

"Delay in improving the embankment means we will face more catastrophes and rising cost of the work," he said.

He said land acquisition appears a challenge, but there are innovative ways to do that. For example, "You pay the compensation well ahead of beginning the project implementation. In that case, the people can resettle early."

Malik Fida A Khan, executive director at the Centre for Environmental and Geographic Information System (CEGIS), said the lack of funding is a crucial factor behind the slow progress in upgrading the embankments.

He also thinks all 139 polders need to be upgraded and it could require about \$7 billion. However, he cautioned that it would be very important to undertake the upgrades with international standard designs, implement the project as per specifications and have it supervised by a third party.

Malik Fida, also member of National River Conservation Commission, suggested that afforestation along the embankments, keeping proper flushing and drainage sluices, regular dredging of the rivers and excavation of the canals within the polders are some tasks that need to be done diligently. Otherwise, there are risks of water logging in the polders that were observed in some cases in the past.

"If we can build strong embankments and maintain them, we can reduce the risks of climate change to a large extent in the coastal region," he said.

Bangladesh raises concern over UK's travel 'red list'

UNB, Dhaka

The Bangladesh High Commissioner to the UK Saida Muna Tasneem has briefed UK's all-party parliamentary group (APPG) about the inconvenience caused by UK's travel ban that has put Bangladesh among those nations on its "red list".

She said the decision will seriously hurt bilateral trade in the apparel, food and beverage sectors and also emergency medical treatment.

On April 2, the UK said it would put Bangladesh, Kenya, Pakistan and the Philippines on its travel "red list," banning entry to people arriving from those countries unless they are Britons or Irish.

The high commissioner, during a recent virtual meeting with the APPG on Bangladesh, raised two issues, including the UK's "red list," and the protracted Rohingya crisis.

Praising the British government's role on the Rohingya issue, especially as the pen-holder at the UN Security Council, Muna called upon the APPG to keep the issue of the sustainable and dignified return of the Rohingyas back to Myanmar high on its agenda at the British Parliament.

"The government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina looks forward to further intensifying Bangladesh's bilateral trade, investment, climate and digital innovation partnership with a post-Brexit 'Global Britain,'" Muna said.

The virtual meeting was held to mark the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence.

Chaired by Rushanara Ali MP, chairman of the APPG on Bangladesh and UK's trade envoy to Bangladesh, the meeting was also attended by the vice-chairs of the parliamentary group, including Bob Blackman MP, Rupa Huq MP, Afzal Khan MP, Khalid Mahmood MP, Tony Lloyd MP, and Geraint Davies MP.

Uncertain

FROM PAGE 1

Poonawalla said this situation will continue till at least July, according to NDTV.

With Serum failing to comply with the agreement to supply three crore jabs of Covishield 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.

The health ministry has made progress in receiving five lakh doses of Sinopharm vaccine from China, an official of the ministry told The Daily Star, seeking anonymity.

The government is now moving to give "emergency use authorisation" to this Chinese vaccine, an official of the Directorate General of Drug Administration told this newspaper, seeking anonymity.

Besides, the Russian government has offered Bangladesh to either buy around 2.5 crore doses of Sputnik V vaccine or produce it locally with its assistance, reports BSS, quoting Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen on Tuesday.

Movement

FROM PAGE 1

Mushtuq Hussain, consultant of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), told The Daily Star. "The daily data indicate the transmission is declining. It is an impact of the ongoing movement restrictions countrywide."

He, however, said the transmission can go up again any time. "During the first wave last year, we saw up and down during the peak of the transmission. Apparently, the latest data shows the peak is most probably over. But we have to wait a few more days to say it with certainty."

He stressed on enforcing health safety guidelines.

Prof Sayedur Rahman, chairman of pharmacology at the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, also stressed on adhering to the health safety guidelines.

"A surgical mask can give more than 90 percent protection from a virus irrespective of variants. The virus will keep mutating and the researchers will need time to bring compatible vaccines. So mask is the best solution for next couple of years," Prof Sayedur told The Daily Star on Tuesday.

During the 24 hours ending at 8:00am yesterday, 95 Covid-19 patients died, raising the total number of casualties to 10,683. This was 1.46 percent of all confirmed cases, according to a DGHS press release.

In those 24 hours, 7,072 Covid-19 patients recovered.

A total of 86,568 patients were undergoing treatment as of yesterday. Of them, 55,517 were in general beds and 793 in ICUs in different hospitals across the country.

Among the 95 deceased, 59 were men and 36 women. Of them, three were aged between 31 and 40; 13 between 41 and 50; 22 between 51 and 60; and 57 were above 60 years old, added the release.