

BANGLADESH UPDATE



3,629
New cases in 24hrs



7,39,703
Total cases



10,869
Deaths



6,47,674
Recoveries



3,091,486
Deaths



145,833,896
Total cases

China initiates platform for South Asian nations

Cooperation in fighting Covid, economic recovery main focus; Bangladesh, four other countries agree to join it

PORIMOL PALMA

China has initiated a new platform for South Asia focusing on Covid cooperation and post-pandemic economic recovery as the region faces severe vaccine shortage amid rising cases of coronavirus that's pushing millions of people into poverty, officials said.

As part of the initiative called "China-South Asia Platform for Covid-19 Consultation, Cooperation, and Post-pandemic Economic Recovery", China has proposed three components -- Medical Equipment Storage, Poverty Alleviation, and E-commerce.

"As per the initial proposal, the medical equipment store will be a facility where China will have different Covid-related equipment, medicine, and even vaccine. The countries joining the platform can avail the medicine or equipment in the case of emergency," said a foreign ministry official.

Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China now have agreed to the platform.

The foreign ministers of these countries will attend a virtual meeting on the modus of operandi of the platform on April 27.

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen told reporters on Thursday that Bangladesh, in principle, agreed to the Chinese proposal as any country can urgently need a vaccine and it will be easier to collect the doses without bureaucratic complexities if they are kept together.

Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen held a meeting with the Chinese vice-minister on Thursday.

Earlier in February a director-general level meeting was held among the six countries.

Asked about two other components of the Chinese initiative, a foreign ministry official said, "China has successful poverty eradication models and they will share those. Besides, China also wants to explore e-commerce as it has got momentum during the pandemic."

The move comes when India has halted the export of Oxford University-AstraZeneca vaccine, made by the Serum Institute of India, to meet its local demand of inoculation amid a record surge in infections in India.

Bangladesh has so far received 10.2 million doses of the vaccine from

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Sitting on a pile of empty drums, an elderly man takes a risky ride on a rickshaw van in the capital's Central Shaheed Minar area. The photo was taken on Thursday.

PHOTO: STAR

Relocation a far cry

FROM PAGE 1
leave the area only after we get the plot in the Chemical Polli. It is not possible otherwise."

There are almost 2,000 shops selling chemicals in Old Dhaka, he said.

CHEMICAL POLLI
The construction of Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation Chemical Industrial Park in Sirajdikhan, Munshiganj, made only 30 percent progress.

The project, drafted in 2011 and revised later, was supposed to be on 50 acres of land and implemented at a cost of Tk 201.80 crore. It was scheduled to be complete by June 2022, according to documents.

After a recent visit to the site, Pradip Ranjan Chakrabarti, secretary of Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division, wrote that the work for raising the land at the site has not even begun.

His report said the project was supposed to acquire 308.33 acres of land. But the officials failed to answer why that had not been done.

The secretary said the project officials rented an office at a shopping mall for Tk 78,000 a month, but failed to justify why that temporary office was needed, the report said.

Contacted, Project Director Saiful

Islam said the work could not progress due to the pandemic.

"Around 30 to 32 percent of the work has so far been done. We will be able to issue orders for land development by next week. If we can finish raising the land by December, we will be behind the schedule," he added.

PLASTIC INDUSTRY
The progress of BSCIC Plastic Industry Estate Project has also been very slow due to land acquisition delays.

Some 300 plastic factories could be relocated from the old town under the project on 50 acres of land.

The Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecneec) approved the project in July 2015 and the work was scheduled to be complete by June last year. The Ecneec then approved an extension of the project.

Project Director Md Nizam Uddin said he did not get the fund, about Tk 218 crore, needed to acquire the land.

Nizam said they are hoping to get the land by this fiscal and start land filling.

PRINTING INDUSTRY
The BSCIC Printing Industries Estate Project will be implemented on 415 acres of land, said its Director Nizam Uddin.

The Ecneec approved the Tk 138.70 crore project in January 2016 and now the cost will rise again, he said.

There will be over 750 small and big industrial units at the park, he said.

ELECTRIC GOODS
Earth filling has been complete at the site of Light Engineering Electric Goods project on 50 acres of land.

Construction of boundary walls is going on, said an official of BSCIC. The project in Tongbari, Munshiganj, is expected to complete by June 2022 at a cost of Tk 309 crore.

TEMPORARY PROJECTS
The government in August 2019 approved the Chemical Warehouse Project in Tongi to relocate 55 warehouses on six acres of land.

The seven one-storey warehouses that were to be built in the first phase have not been done yet.

Physical work of Godown for Temporary Facilitating Chemicals Storage Project in the capital's Shyampur is progressing slowly.

Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation is implementing the Tk 77.89 crore project on 6.17 acres of land. The project is scheduled to be complete by June this year.

"We're trying to do it by June, but if we fail, we will need a time extension," said Project Director Liakat Ali, adding that the pandemic was to blame for the delay.

Lockdown now in reverse gear

FROM PAGE 1
malls and shops reopen right now could aggravate the Covid-19 situation, considering that a huge number of people might throng those for Eid shopping.

If the infection rate goes up once again after the reopening, the government, which has already faced a severe economic loss due to the Covid-19-led closures, will ultimately face dire consequences, the experts warned.

Soon after the announcement yesterday, road transport leaders requested the authorities to allow them to resume operations of buses and minibuses.

Khondaker Enayet Ullah, secretary general of Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association, said they want to operate buses once the ongoing "lockdown" would end on April 28.

"We have already talked with the authorities concerned, but no decision has been taken yet," he told The Daily Star.

As the country passed the 10th day of restrictions, both the number of deaths and infections reported came down. Eighty-eight deaths from Covid-19 and 3,629 new cases were recorded yesterday.

On April 16, the positivity rate was 23 percent. After that, the rate has been falling gradually and yesterday it was 14 percent.

Prof Be-Nazir, also a former director of the disease control department of the health ministry, said the country has just started reaping the benefits of the "lockdown", but things may reverse after the reopening of the malls and shops.

"The Covid-19 cases may shoot up," he warned.

According to him, three parties -- businessmen, shoppers and the government -- will be the "losers" due to the decision.

"Businessmen will invest money, but I'm afraid that not many people will show up for shopping given the current Covid situation. So, they will face losses," he said, adding that many shoppers may be infected and die as the malls could turn into "Covid-19 hotspots".

"Those who have walked down the unscientific path and those illogical methods have been the ultimate sufferers," he said, pointing at the recent rise in Covid-19 cases amid the elections in India's West Bengal.

Talking on the issue, health experts asked how health guidelines could be followed if people in droves go shopping.

The decision of reopening of shopping malls has meanwhile also puzzled law enforcers, who have been stationed on roads to check public movement amid the ongoing restrictions.

Wishing to remain unnamed, an on-duty police officer in Wari said public movement would increase after the reopening of the malls. "What will we do then? We're yet to get any directives from our high-ups," he said.

Additional Police Commissioner (Traffic) Munibur Rahman told The Daily Star that they were yet to get any directives in this regard. "We'll take measures accordingly once we get new directives," he said.

Currently, people who need to go out must carry a "movement pass" from the police. Those from several professions, including health workers, journalists, and other emergency workers, however, do not require the pass.

Talking to The Daily Star, Dr Dewan Aminul Islam Shahin, president of Dhaka New Market Business Association, said

they had already started asking traders to wear masks and ensure that everyone visiting their shops sanitise hands and wash them with soap.

There will be other protections and no one will be allowed in the market without masks. "Announcements will be made time and again reminding customers to maintain health rules," he said.

Aminul, however, said, "There are over 3,000 businessmen and staffers working at the market. There will be another 5,000 to 6,000 customers on the market premises. There will be a huge crowd after 5:00pm when they will start leaving market altogether," he said.

"If the duration of the time limit is relaxed, people will be able to shop maintaining distance and health guideline properly," he said.

During this time of the year, people from all over the country flock the capital's Urdu Road, where a huge number of wholesale markets of readymade garments are situated.

MH Mostofa, general secretary, Urdu Road Avontorin Garments Businessmen Association, said they have already directed the respective associations of all 27 markets in the area to follow the health guidelines and not to let retailers make any crowd.

"It's already late. But we're happy that the government has allowed us to open the markets," he said adding it will be difficult for retailers to come from distant districts if the restriction on the transport is not lifted.

The novel coronavirus situation started deteriorating in March. Against this backdrop, the government imposed restrictions on public movement from April 5 to April 13.

Two days later, they allowed resumption of inter-city bus services and four days later shopping malls and markets were allowed to reopen, defying health experts' recommendations on enforcing a strict lockdown.

During those days of lax restrictions, the Covid-19 positivity rate, DGHS data shows, had started crawling up. On April 09, it shot up to 24 percent.

The government then imposed a "stricter lockdown" across the country and introduced the "movement pass" on April 14 for eight days. It extended the lockdown to April 28 later.

Initially, all public and private offices were closed and public transport remained suspended. Emergency services, factories, and a few branches of banks, however, continued their operations.

Later, financial institutions and account officers at field levels were allowed to start operations on limited scale from Thursday.

And a day later, yesterday, the government issued the notice, allowing businessmen to open markets and shopping malls.

88 MORE DIE
With yesterday's 88 deaths, the Covid-19 death toll in the country reached 10,869. The death rate stood at 1.47 percent, reads a press release issued by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

A total of 25,896 samples were tested across the country in 24 hours (till 8:00am yesterday). The total number of people infected jumped to 7,39,703, said the release.

The current positivity rate is 14 percent while the total positivity rate stands at 13.95 percent.

At least 5,225 Covid-19 patients have recovered during the 24-hour period, added the release.

Biden urges world to work

FROM PAGE 1
"The United States is committed, we are committed to making those investments to grow our economy here at home while connecting with markets around the world."

Biden called the meeting with dozens of heads of state to declare the United States back at the climate leadership table after his predecessor, former President Donald Trump, withdrew from the Paris Agreement to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

Biden, who returned the United States to the 2015 pact, announced a new U.S. target on Thursday to reduce its emissions 50%-52% by 2030 compared with 2005 levels. Japan and Canada also

raised their targets.
Bill Gates, a wealthy businessman-turned-philanthropist, said he was working with partners on a program called Breakthrough Energy Catalyst that would raise money from governments, philanthropists, and companies to make capital investments to bring down the cost of clean technology.

"We can build new industries and companies that support communities around the world with good jobs on making the transition to the clean economy," said Gates, who has invested about \$2 billion toward the development of high tech electricity generation and storage.

4 killed in chemical warehouse fire in city

FROM PAGE 1
rented out the ground floor rooms to chemical shops and for chemical storage. The building's tenants protested but to no avail, said Maidul, a BBA student of Mirpur Bangla College.

In the early hours yesterday, a devastating fire at the ground floor of Musa Mansion left four people dead and 23 others wounded.

Injured in the fire, Maidul is now undergoing treatment at Sheikh Hasina National Burn Institute and Plastic Surgery along with his parents and sister.

He said his father did not move elsewhere even after the ground floor shops were rented out to chemical traders as his wholesale rice shop is at a nearby market.

Besides, most of the buildings in Armanitola area have chemical shops and warehouses in their ground floors, said the youth who lives on the second floor of the fire-affected six-storey Musa Mansion.

Maidul said he detected a smell of smoke around 3:15am.

"I opened the main door of our flat to find the source of the smell. Soon smoke billowed into the flat and we started suffocating," he told The Daily Star while lying in a hospital bed.

He said soon he along with his parents and sister ran to the balcony and managed to break the grill. Locals then came from adjacent buildings and rescued them.

"We narrowly escaped death," Maidul said feebly.

Runu Roy, owner of a stationery shop in the area, said around 80 percent houses in Armanitola have chemical storages and shops on the ground floors, while residential apartments are situated on the upper floors.

He said he shifted his residence to a safer place in fear of fire even though his family had lived in Armanitola for

generations.

The dead were identified as Sumaiya Akhter, 22, a second-year student of English Department in Eden College who lived with her family on the third floor of the building; security guard of the chemical shops Mohammad Russel, 27; his maternal uncle and caretaker of the building Md Waliullah, 70, and Mohammad Kabir, 27, an employee of a ground-floor shop.

The ground floor of Musa Mansion has around 14 chemical shops and storage facilities while there are 15 apartments in the upper floors, with three apartments to each floor.

The fire broke out at a chemical storage facility on the ground floor of the six-storey building around 3:15am, said Brig Gen Md Sazzad Hussain, director general of Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence.

The firefighters managed to contain the blaze on the ground floor, said Fire Service Assistant Director Abdul Halim.

Most of the injured fell ill due to inhaling smoke. The reason behind the fire could be determined after investigation, he added.

He said a huge amount of chemical is stored there.

Fire Service formed a four-member inquiry committee headed by Deputy Director (development) Nur Hasan Ahmed.

Nineteen units of firefighters brought the blaze under control after frantic attempts for around two hours, said Mahfuz Reeben, duty officer at fire service control room.

Junayed Sarkar, brother of Sumaiya, one of the deceased, said when they were all desperately trying to escape from the balcony of their third-floor apartment, they realised that Sumaiya was not among them.

Juanyed and his father Ibrahim Sarkar then went looking for her and

found Sumaiya lying in a bathroom, he said.

Doctors declared her dead after she was rushed to Mitford Hospital.

Junayed, his father, mother Sufia Sarkar, sister Mona and her husband Ashiqur Rahman were undergoing treatment at the burn institute.

The condition of Mona and her husband was stated to be critical.

The 23 injured, including four fire service officials, were shifted to Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery where they are undergoing treatment, said Dr Samanta Lal Sen, chief coordinator of the institute.

Except for three to four, all other wounded inhaled poisonous smoke that led to breathing problems and inhalation injuries, he added.

Four of the injured -- newlywed couple and computer engineers Mona and her husband Ashiqur, rice traders Khorsheed Alam, 70, and his brother Delwar Hossain, 58 -- were admitted to ICU with burn injuries.

The chemical storages in Old Dhaka buildings caused a devastating fire in Nimtoli in 2010, killing 126 people, while 70 others died in another devastating fire in Chawkbazar in 2019.

The incidents caused a huge outcry for removal of chemical shops and storages from buildings.

After the Chawkbazar fire, the media reported that there are more than 25,000 chemical warehouses in Old Dhaka, of which around 15,000 are in residential buildings. Fire service officials said only around two percent storehouses have permission from the city corporation.

Late last night, the duty officer of Bangladesh Police Station confirmed that a case had been filed in connection with the fire incident. It could not, however, be confirmed who were made accused in the case.

Sky-high airfare adds to migrant workers' woes

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Association of International Recruiting Agencies (Baira) and Association of Travel Agents of Bangladesh (Atab).

However, ticket prices to these destinations remain affordable in several Indian cities, the associations said.

It costs around Tk 13,500 to fly to Riyadh from Kolkata and around Tk 17,000 to Dubai from Mumbai, said Fakhru Islam, president of the Recruiting Agency Welfare Organization of Bangladesh.

A migrant worker in Nepal spends Tk 35,000 to fly to Riyadh and Tk 20,000 to go to Dubai while it costs between Tk 39,000 and Tk 43,000 to fly to Riyadh from Sri Lanka, he said.

Tipu and Fakhru said Bangladesh risks losing its labour market in the Middle East due to the high cost of air tickets.

Both Baira and Atab leaders said it takes around five hours to fly to the Middle East. But the tickets are a lot more expensive than an 18-20-hour flight ticket to the US, which does not cost more than Tk 65,000.

Atab President Monsur Ahmed Kalam told The Daily Star that the government, especially the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (Caab), should do

something immediately.

Before the special flights to Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, the UAE and Singapore were launched on April 17, Caab wrote to the airlines concerned, requesting that the ticket prices remain regular since restrictions on the number of passengers were relaxed and the ground handling and other relevant charges were fixed as if they were scheduled passenger flights.

About the exorbitant ticket prices, Caab Chairman Air Vice Marshal M Mafidur Rahman said, "We will look into the matter."

He added that the high prices can be linked to the rise in demand.

Contacted, Biman Bangladesh Airlines Managing Director and CEO Abu Saleh Mostafa Kamal said his company was forced to raise the price to cope with the restrictions set by Caab.

"We can now carry only 260 passengers in a wide body plane that has 415 seats," he said. "Besides, we find only a few passengers in many flights returning to Dhaka... How will we operate flights if our operational costs are not returned?"

Tarik A Alowaidi, country manager at Saudi Arabian Airlines could not be

reached for comment.

Several Saudi-bound migrant workers said they struggled a lot to pay for the air tickets.

"I had to borrow Tk 1 lakh from two relatives just to buy a ticket to Saudi Arabia," Ariful Haque told this correspondent last week.

In an inter-ministerial meeting on April 16, the government decided to operate around 100 special flights to Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, the UAE and Singapore for a week from April 17 to fly several thousand migrant workers to their workplaces.

Bangladesh's Biman and US-Bangla and 10 foreign airlines were allowed to operate direct flights to those five countries.

The government on April 11 suspended operations of all international flights to and from Bangladesh for a week from April 14 to contain the spread of Covid-19.

Due to the extension of countrywide travel restrictions, Caab also extended the operations of special flights to April 28.

According to Baira and Atab, about 20,000 to 25,000 migrant workers were supposed to fly out to their workplaces in a week from April 14.

'GUNFIGHT' With BGB Rohingya 'drug dealer' killed in Bandarban

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

A Rohingya man suspected to be a yaba dealer was killed in a "gunfight" with Border Guard Bangladesh in Bandarban's Naikhongchhari upazila early yesterday.

Mohammad Ibrahim, 30, was from Kutupalong Lambashia Rohingya camp in Cox's Bazar Ukha upazila, said Lt Col Ali Haider Azad Ahmed, commanding officer of BGB-34 Battalion.

BGB claimed to have recovered 80,000 yaba pills, a pipe gun, and two cartridges from the scene.

The "gunfight" took place in Aambagan area near Baishfari border around 12:30am, said the BGB official.

A BGB patrol team took position in Aambagan area on information that a consignment of yaba tablets would be smuggled to Bangladesh through the border.

When the BGB men challenged a group of five-six people, they opened fire, triggering the "gunfight", he said.

At one stage, the criminals fled. Later, the BGB team found a body lying on the spot which was sent to Cox's Bazar Sadar Hospital morgue for an autopsy, the BGB official added.

Process of filing a case in this connection is underway.

Dhaka very optimistic

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Bangladesh, whose per capita carbon emission is much lower than global average, would also take measures to cut carbon emission, he said.

"In future, we will reduce coal-based power projects and go for renewable energy more vigorously," Momen said, adding that going for green energy would, however, require technology transfer.

Noting that a US senator has recently proposed helping the developing countries with technology, the minister said the proposal, if passed, would be very helpful for Bangladesh.

Asked about the possibility of mobilising \$100 billion per year by the developed countries for climate actions in developing countries, Momen said as the US has taken the leadership role in the global efforts to fight climate change, it is expected that the developed countries will come up.

So far, only \$30 billion has been mobilised. The US, which was supposed to contribute \$3 billion by 2020, donated only \$1 billion during President Barack Obama's tenure. Immediate past president Donald Trump made no contribution. However, Biden has announced contributing \$2 billion soon.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who addressed the two-day virtual summit yesterday as president of the Climate Vulnerable Forum, put forward four suggestions, including keeping global temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius, mobilising \$100 billion annually and transferring technology.

Treatment cost

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Around 11 workers with gunshot wounds admitted at the CMCH have had the bullets removed, said Surgeon Jamir.

Habib Ullah, 24, of Gondamara, had a bullet in his lower abdomen. He told The Daily Star that the bullet was removed from his body on April 18.

On April 17, when he went to work at the power plant, several workers said they would demand their salaries in arrears.

"When the clash broke out, I was in the toilet. I was shot the moment I stepped out of the toilet," he said.

Habib's father Rafique told The Daily Star that he had received Tk 50,000 from S Alam Group. But he has already bought medication worth Tk 65,000.

"I'm a farmer with little income. How would I be able to continue [bearing] the treatment cost? I don't know," a frustrated Rafique told The Daily Star.

Habib said his son would need 12 bags of blood, but he does not know how to manage