

BANGLADESH UPDATE



2,697
New cases in 24hrs



7,42,400
Total cases



10,952
Deaths



6,53,151
Recoveries



3,107,129
Deaths



146,872,331
Total cases

Close land ports

Urges BNP to contain Covid

UNB, Dhaka

BNP yesterday urged the government to close the country's land ports with India as the neighbouring country is witnessing a serious outbreak of coronavirus.

"The coronavirus infection has sharply increased in India... a terrible situation has been prevailing there due to the prevalence of new variants," said party Secretary General Mirza Fakhruul Islam Alamgir.

Speaking at a virtual press conference, he said, "West Bengal has the highest number of virus infections. So, we think, the land ports with India

need to be closed completely."

Fakhruul also opposed the government's decision of keeping the inbound air passengers in quarantine for only three days instead of two weeks. He suggested the government announce a seven-point incentive package for those affected by the second wave.

He said many had returned to their village homes before the lockdown. "As the government is going to allow shops and shopping malls to reopen from Sunday, these people are returning to Dhaka and they'll go back before the upcoming Eid. As a result, the virus will spread badly across the country."

Hefajat conspired

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Detectives are investigating at least 65 cases -- 53 filed following Hefajat's mayhem in 2013 and 12 filed for violence in March this year.

"Citing information given by the arrested leaders", DB officials claimed that most of the leaders thought that Hefajat was the only effective platform to go to power, using madrasa students as shields.

"They want to turn Bangladesh into a country like Pakistan or Afghanistan if they come to power," he claimed.

Mahbub added that BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami leaders were also involved in the conspiracy in 2013 and March this year.

He said Hefajat leaders formed an organisation called "Rabetatul Waizin Bangladesh" with its leaders from across the country. They would control Waz Mehfilis by forcing organisers to invite their speakers.

"A group of Hefajat leaders are involved in propagating extremism. Police are trying to identify them by scrutinising footages," said Mahbub.

To interrogate the arrestees, three teams have been formed with investigating officers who have knowledge on the Quran and Hadiths. They were trying to learn about the leaders' main purpose and identify their roles.

Asked about Hefajat's funding, the joint commissioner said most of the money comes from abroad and police were trying to identify the sources.

"The operation will continue until all the accused involved are arrested," he added.

HEFAJAT REMOVING FOOTAGE

As law enforcers were facing difficulties collecting evidence in the cases filed following Hefajat's mayhem in 2013, as several years have passed, charges of probe of some recent and old cases were handed over to specialised police units.

Responsibilities of around 23 investigations were given to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and 16 to Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI) recently.

However, these agencies were not able to collect any significant footage or forensic evidence.

Banaj Kumar Majumder, chief of PBI, told The Daily Star that they have started collecting footage of the mayhem and anti-state remarks by Hefajat leaders.

But officials said the video and audio clips related to the violence were being removed from various social media sites, while the CCTV cameras covering the violence have been smashed.

Even videos of different waz mehfilis, in which Hefajat leaders

made anti-state remarks, were not available, they added.

Many Hefajat supporters have already started removing the videos, Banaj said.

"But we are trying to collect all those clips and archiving those so that we can provide forensic and technical evidence," said the PBI chief.

Mahbubur Rahman, additional inspector general, also chief of CID, said their officials were trying to collect footage of the violence but it had become difficult.

He sought further support from the media.

ARRESTS CONTINUE

As a part of a continuous drive, police yesterday arrested a dozen more Hefajat leaders and supporters, including Nayeb-e-Amir Ahmed Abdul Kader.

A team of DMP DB (Tejgaon Division) arrested Kader, also former president of Chhatra Shibir, from West Agargaon around 7:00pm yesterday.

Mahmud Ullah, 26, son of Madaripur Pir Abdul Hamid, and a juvenile have been arrested from Sathkira for their alleged involvement in Hefajat violence, reports our Munshiganj correspondent.

Besides, seven more Hefajat supporters were arrested in cases filed for violence in Brahmanbaria. The total arrests in the district is 353, reports our correspondent.

Meanwhile, Md Ashraf Ali, central assistant secretary of Islami Chhatra Khelafat, on Friday made a confessional statement in a case filed over the attack on police on March 27 in Brahmanbaria.

AHLE SUNNAT'S CONDEMNATION OF HEFAJAT

Terming Hefajat-e-Islam an extremist and militant outfit, the top 551 al-ulemas of Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat yesterday in a statement called upon the government to ban the organisation.

In a joint statement, Ahle Sunnat leaders said since its birth in 2010, Hefajat has been involved in spreading violence.

"Sometimes they are threatening to demolish Khanka Sharif and the shrines of Islamic preachers and sometimes they want to establish extremist militancy in the country by publicly threatening to kill the country's majority," they said.

The signatories to the statement include Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat Bangladesh Central Chairman Kazi Muhammad Mueenuddin Ashrafi, Secretary General Syed Moshuddaulah, MA Mannan, Solaiman Ansari, Abdul Bari, MA Manna, Nurul Alam, among others.

Statements, FIR mismatch

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against 2,500 unidentified people on charges of attacking law enforcers and killing workers.

Faruq Ahmed, chief coordinator of the power plant, filed another case accusing 22 named and 1,040 unnamed people over torching vehicles and looting valuables.

Rasheduzzaman in the case statement said a group of about 300 workers abstained from work at the project site on April 16 to press home their nine-point demand. However, another group of workers agreed to continue work.

On April 17 morning, around 2,500 workers gathered at the project site in a procession. At one stage, locals entered the site breaking through the barbed wire fence at the instigation of outsiders, said the complainant.

He said the armed workers and outsiders launched an attack on Chinese workers and law enforcers. The agitating workers started vandalising vehicles and setting those on fire. They pelted police with brick chunks.

Rasheduzzaman said shots were fired at police from the workers' quarters. He said police fired rubber bullets, teargas shells and "china bullets" to save lives, properties and government firearms. The plaintiff said police opened fire following his directive.

He mentioned that five workers were killed in a "shootout between workers and outsiders".

However, witnesses and injured workers told The Daily Star that police opened fire on them indiscriminately after some agitating workers pelted law enforcers with brick chunks. At

least six witnesses said the casualties occurred following indiscriminate firing by police.

Akhter Kabir Chowdhury, president of Chattogram unit of Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujan), said all the seven killed were project workers and no outsider was killed.

"Police are yet to recover any arms from workers or outsiders. Besides, no policeman was hit by bullets during the incident. So, there are discrepancies in the case statement."

He said preparing such a case statement is a mockery of workers' lives. The rights activist said police could write such an FIR as there was no transparency and accountability.

Asked about discrepancies in the FIR, Officer-in-Charge of Banshkhali Police Station Shafiul Kabir said, "The SI wrote the case statement and I just put my signature on it. He can tell you better about it as he was on the spot."

Asked why he did not go through the FIR before signing it, the OC said if there was any incorrect information or discrepancies in the case statement, it would be detected during the probe.

The workers on April 17 were staging demonstrations to press home their demands, including payment of arrears, pay hike, an hour's break each for iftar and offering prayers, and payment of two Eid bonuses.

S Alam Group is setting up the 1,224 megawatt coal-fired power plant at Pachsim Gandamara of Banshkhali. It is a joint venture of six companies of S Alam Group, SEPCOIII Electric Power Construction Corporation, China and HTG Development Group Co Ltd, China, according to the official website of S Alam group.



A rickshaw van puller and his passenger share an umbrella, seeking a little comfort under the glaring sun yesterday afternoon. The photo was taken in front of Bangla College Mirpur in the capital.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

No vaccines anytime soon

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In the note verbale, the High Commission of India also stressed on co-production of Covaxin that was produced by Bharat Biotech.

It said icddr of Bangladesh and Bharat Biotech entered into an agreement in December last year for the phase-III clinical trials of the Covaxin, but the actual trials were still awaiting approval.

Mentioning that Covaxin has shown efficacy of over 80 percent, the note also said, "If the co-production of Covaxin, as offered by India, had begun in Bangladesh using our immense scaling up of capacity and presence of multiple manufacturers, 'Made in Bangladesh' vaccines would have been administered in our country and in the friendly countries as well.

"But that opportunity is still not lost, provided that we make the best use of it."

The development came after the Bangladesh foreign ministry wrote to the Indian high commission last week, seeking information about the supply of the AstraZeneca vaccine as per a contract.

The government on December 13 last year signed the deal with Serum to purchase 3 crore doses of AstraZeneca vaccine.

As per the deal, the government was supposed to get 50 lakh doses a month. But until yesterday, it only received 70 lakh doses in two installments.

The Indian government had sent 33 lakh doses as gift.

Amid a steep rise in Covid cases in India and reports of shortage of vaccines, the Indian government

reportedly paused vaccine exports last month to meet domestic demand.

Serum CEO Adar Poonawalla in an interview to NDTV last week said, "There is no clarity on exports and we also right now feel that we should not look at exports for two months during these [Covid] cases. Maybe in June-July, we could start looking at small exports starting again."

"Right now, we are going to prioritise the needs of the nation [India] first."

Poonawalla said this situation would continue until at least July.

The Serum CEO's comments have also made global Covid-19 vaccine supply under the COVAX facility uncertain.

Poonawalla, on April 16, had asked US President Joe Biden to "lift the embargo" on raw materials to assist the production of Covid-19 vaccines.

"Respected @POTUS, if we are to truly unite in beating this virus, on behalf of the vaccine industry outside the US, I humbly request you to lift the embargo of raw material exports out of the US so that vaccine production can ramp up. Your administration has the details," Mr Poonawalla had tweeted.

Serum, which produces 'Covishield', uses bio-reactor bags from US firms ABEC and GE Healthcare to grow cells for their vaccines, according to reports. It also uses filters, microcarrier beads and cell culture media- all of which are in short supply.

'Serum has no right to suspend supply'

Beximco pharmaceuticals Managing Director Nazmul Hassan Papon yesterday said Serum has no right to

suspend vaccine supplies to Bangladesh after the former had received the payment in advance.

The government should make stronger efforts to get the shipments on time, he told reporters at the capital's Kurmitola General Hospital after taking his second dose of the Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine.

"The government paid in advance for 1.5 crore doses, but we received only 70 lakh... The government should make the demand loud and clear," Papon said.

Beximco is the local distributor of the Oxford vaccine produced by Serum.

Bangladesh's vaccination programme has been gripped by uncertainty after the Indian government reportedly barred the vaccine export last month.

Officials said the current inoculation campaign in Bangladesh would continue for 12 days at most with the stock.

With Serum failing to comply with the agreement, the Bangladesh government started exploring alternative sources in a desperate attempt to continue the inoculation against coronavirus.

Health officials said the health ministry made progress in securing five lakh doses of Sinopharm vaccine from China.

"The government is now arranging 'emergency use authorisation' to the Chinese vaccine, sources said.

Besides, Russia has offered Bangladesh the opportunity to either purchase 2.5 crore doses of Sputnik V or produce it locally with its assistance, Health Minister Zahid Maleque told this daily last week.

Fruitful reforms rising from ruins

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front-runner in transparency regarding factory safety and value-chain responsibility, thanks to initiatives launched in the aftermath of the disaster -- including those of the Accord and Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, and the RMG Sustainability Council," the firm said.

These measures led to the closure of hundreds of unsafe, bottom-tier factories and the scaling-up of remediation activities in many others.

These steps helped restore Bangladesh's spot in the global apparel-sourcing market, leading to a decade of rapid growth. Around 10 years ago, the sector forecasted a growth of 7-9 percent.

Indeed, RMG exports from Bangladesh more than doubled, from \$14.6 billion in 2011 to \$33.1 billion in 2019 -- a compound annual growth rate of 7 percent.

Over this period, Bangladesh's RMG industry increased its share of global garment exports from 4.7 to 6.7 percent.

"This is within the range of what we forecasted in our report; however, it also shows that the country has not captured the full potential we had foreseen 10 years ago," the McKinsey report also said.

Bangladesh will continue as a sourcing hotspot for international retailers and brands, the survey also said.

The Rana Plaza building collapse was a wake-up call for Bangladesh. Just after the incident, the labour law was amended twice since 2013 and the labor rules were promulgated in 2015 with a major reform in the trade unionism.

The sector also launched several national-level trainers and mid-management professionals on social dialogue and industrial relations in collaboration with International Labour Organisation and the government.

A central fund for the welfare of the workers, where more than \$10 million is being contributed annually from RMG exports, was established.

Unionisation has been made easier and the formation of an elected participation committee has been made mandatory in the factories, which are important stepping stones to empower workers.

Nearly 4,000 large, small and medium scale garment factories were inspected by three agencies, including Accord, Alliance and government initiatives to strengthen fire, electrical

and structural safety.

Of the total number of inspected factories, nearly 3,000 have so far remediated as per the recommendations by the Accord and Alliance.

The remediation of more than 1,000 small garment factories, which are not members of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), are yet to be completed.

After the departure of the Accord and Alliance, a local RMG Sustainability Council (RSC) was formed in collaboration with ILO representation from the retailers and brands and the BGMEA for monitoring the progress made in garment factory safety.

Bangladesh's preferential trade facility -- Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) -- was suspended by the US government in June 2013 after the Rana Plaza incident.

Although Bangladesh applied twice to the US Trade Representative (USTR) upon fulfilling 16 conditions given by the then Obama Administration under the Bangladesh Action Plan for reinstating the GSP, the US government is still saying Bangladesh "needs to do more" to regain trade privileges.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh has signed the Sustainability Compact with the EU, ILO, Canada and the USA to show responsible business behaviour in the global supply chain.

The labour ministry has developed a publicly accessible garment factory database. Under the 16 conditions given by the US, the Department for Inspection of Factories and Establishments (DIFE) was established.

The garment sector in Bangladesh has brought a revolution in green production.

Being the world's leader in green garment factories now, nine out of the top 10 positions of green factories are being occupied by the Bangladesh RMG industry, while the country can boast with 135 Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified (39 Platinum) factories and 500 more factories in the certification pipeline.

Bangladesh has joined the UNDP and Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) to conduct a survey on "Sustainability Reporting Study Mapping in 47 RMGs in Bangladesh" to develop a report highlighting the impact of Ready-Made Garment factories on Sustainable Development Goals.

It has also joined the Occupational

Safety and Health to upscale the industry capacity mainly to enhance efficiency of the readymade garments industry to make it more resilient and sustainable to ensure lives and livelihoods and complementing the growth and development of the nation.

In the fiscal 2008-09, the share of non-traditional markets in the country's export was 6.87 percent with the export value of \$ 848.87 million, which has reached 17.10 percent with a value of \$ 4.9 billion in 2019-20.

Currently, more than 1,500 Bangladeshi companies are certified by the Global Organic Textile Standard -- the second highest number in any country in the world.

Among many reforms, the empowerment of women was one, said BGMEA's immediate-past president Rubana Huq.

As part of the measures, 60 female garment workers have been given a chance to pursue their graduation at the Asian University for Women (AUW) with assistance from their respective factory owners.

Furthermore, considering the importance of enlightening the next generation with literacy, the BGMEA and Jaago Foundation have partnered in an initiative to provide online education for workers' children who spend a large part of their time in factory day cares under the Pledge to Early Childhood Learning of Workers' Children.

Along with that, acknowledging the importance of mental health and wellbeing of our workers was one of the major concerns and that's why, under the Pledge to Mental Health, the BGMEA has joined hands with "Moner Bondhu" -- a platform for mental health and well-being services.

"The safety has been strengthened in the garment sector in Bangladesh after the Rana Plaza incident. We need to continue the progress of security [of the workers] to stop recurrence of such a deadly incident," said Nazma Akter, president of Sammitilo Garment Sramik Federation.

"Considering the fact that the RMG export of Bangladesh only occupies 6.38 percent global market shares, there are immense untapped opportunities ahead of us and all we need to do is to diversify our manufacturing," said Rubana.

"We have learnt a lot of lessons from the Rana Plaza building collapse. We did not know such details of the factory safety earlier. However, after the Rana Plaza incident, we have learnt how to ensure safety for the workers," said Faruque Hassan, BGMEA President.

Experts again warn

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kinds of movement], we are recommending a set of measures that must be implemented to contain the virus.

"The situation in India should be an example for us," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

The positivity fell for the seventh consecutive day yesterday when the rate was 13.11 percent. The rate peaked at 23 percent during the second wave.

The cabinet division issued a notice on Friday, allowing shopping malls to remain open from 10:00am to 5:00pm from April 25.

But health experts say the latest decision to reopen might jeopardise the gains that have been made and worsen the situation once again.

Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader yesterday said the government was considering whether to resume public transport services from April 28.

"Many people are stuck in different areas... during the ongoing lockdown. The government is actively considering resumption of public transport after the lockdown," he said.

Quader, also general secretary of the Awami League, said public vehicles must keep 50 percent seats empty and will be allowed to charge a fare that will be fixed later.

"We have to learn how to live with coronavirus..."

Bangladesh Railway (BR) will also resume train services on April 29 if the government resumes public transport.

Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan said, "If public transport resumes, we will resume the train services. We have the preparations."

Passenger train services were suspended on April 5, when the government imposed restrictions on public movement and transport.

The public health advisory committee on Covid-19 on Thursday recommended the enforcement of health safety rules, which include wearing of face masks, physical distancing, and frequent hand washing.

Shopping malls and kitchen markets should stay open at different times in different areas, the committee members said at a meeting.

They also demanded sustained restrictions on vehicles entering or leaving Dhaka and Chattogram cities and 50 percent or lower number of employees at offices.

"We want Dhaka and Chattogram to be disconnected from other parts of the country for a few more days. Someone who must enter or leave these cities may get a pass from the authorities," Prof ABM Khurshid Alam said.

The committee also recommended closing down the border with India and suspending all international flights.

Mushtuq Hussain, consultant of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), who attended the meeting, said, "It would not be wise to lift the restriction now."

Last week, the National Technical Advisory Committee on Covid-19 suggested the government lift the restrictions in phases based on the situation.

83 MORE DIE

With the 83 deaths reported yesterday, the toll reached 10,952.

A total of 20,571 samples were tested in 24 hours preceding 8:00am yesterday.

The total number of people infected in Bangladesh reached 7,42,400, said a DGHS release.

At least 5,477 Covid-19 patients recovered during the 24-hour period, it added.

Newlyweds

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that the duo was put on life support.

Two other persons, burnt in the incident, are also at the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of the hospital and they are in critical condition, the doctor said, adding that 16 more people were receiving treatment there.

The ground floor of Musa Mansion has around 18 chemical stores and storages while there are 15 apartments on the upper floors, with three apartments on each floor.

Contacted, Anif Hossain, general secretary of Bangladesh Chemical and Perfumery Merchants Association, said they wished to relocate their businesses as soon as they get a safer place from the government.

LOCAL'S RESENTMENT
Many residents of the old town showed their resentment for not relocating the warehouses from the area and demanded immediate relocation of all the chemical warehouses.

Runu Roy, one such resident, said, "Eighty percent of buildings in Armanitola have chemical warehouses, putting the whole area under huge risk."

He also said that he shifted his family members to a different area in 2010 after the Nimtoly fire.

Runu, the owner of a confectionery store in Armanitola, said chemical warehouses pay four to five times higher rent to the building owners for securing their places.

NO ARREST
Shahin Fakir, officer-in-charge of Bongshal Police Station, said a case was filed in this connection against eight named and 27 to 28 unnamed persons for their negligence.

Police also sealed the building, including chemical stores and storages, in presence of the DSCC and DC office executive magistrates. They also asked the residents of the building to vacate it within two hours, he added.

Keeping some samples for tests, the chemical substances were destroyed and police were trying to arrest the accused, he further said.

FOUR-MEMBER PROBE COMMITTEE
A four-member probe committee was formed by the Fire Service and Civil Defence, headed by its deputy director (development) Noor Hasan, on Friday.

The committee was asked to submit its report by ten working days, Noor said, adding that they already started working and would visit the site on Monday.