

**ASEAN-JUNTA
CONSENSUS**
Myanmar activists slam the
move, vow to continue protests
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"The government will be forced to impose strict lockdown again if people do not follow health guidelines once public transport services are resumed...."
ROAD TRANSPORT AND BRIDGES MINISTER OBAIDUL QUADER



"Those who have received the first jab are concerned whether they would get the second dose in time."
JATIYA PARTY CHAIRMAN GM QUADER



"We were confident, our spirits were up after successfully tackling the first wave, but this storm has shaken the nation."
INDIAN PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI ON COVID



Is Huji taking over Hefajat?

Investigations find Huji linked to recent Hefajat mayhem; Huji wants change in leadership

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN and RASHIDUL HASAN

Banned militant outfit Harkat-ul-Jihad (Huji) is back, this time in the garb of Hefajat-e-Islam, according to intelligence reports of multiple agencies, including the police.

Huji was found to be involved in the three-day Hefajat mayhem that was carried out across the country from March 26 to March 28 "in protest against the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi".

"It [the mayhem] was actually a planned activity of Huji," according to an official of an intelligence agency.

Talking to The Daily Star, several law enforcers investigating the mayhem said leaders of Huji, which was banned in 2005 following the grisly grenade attack on an Awami League rally that killed 22 people, from which Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina narrowly escaped, a year earlier, started to gather under the Hefajat umbrella. It managed to gain some control over the Qwami madrasa-based organisation recently.

The rapid transformation of Hefajat from an Islamic advocacy platform (of

madrasa teachers and students) to a political pressure group since 2013 drew a lot of radical Islamists outfits like Huji, JMB and Ansar al-Islam to join Hefajat and regroup within it.

Huji started to call the Hefajat shots when a number of its leaders managed to get posts in the recently-formed committee of Hefajat. They instigated the recent violence that left at least 17 people dead, said the investigators.

"In our investigation, we have got evidence on Hefajat's links with militant outfits. A group of Afghanistan returnees along with some Jamaat-Shibir men became tagged with the religion-based organisation [Hefajat]," Mahub Alam, joint commissioner (Detective Branch) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, told The Daily Star a couple of days ago.

Huji leaders are known as "Afghan fighters", officials of counterterrorism said.

The joint commissioner said this group (Afghan war returnees) alter the decision of top Hefajat leaders and it is them who mainly carry out subversive activities under the banner of Hefajat.

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Nazma sitting on a sidewalk of the capital's Minto Road with her young daughter on Saturday afternoon. While her husband, a day labourer, is away at work Nazma sells face masks to pedestrians -- a venture that has not been very successful during the relatively empty streets amid the "lockdown".

PHOTO:
FIROZ AHMED

Qawmi teachers, students to stay clear of politics

Decides the govt-recognised board of the madrasas

RASHIDUL HASAN and MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN

The combined Islamic education board of Qawmi madrasas yesterday decided that the teachers and students of Qawmi madrasas will stay away from all sorts of political activities.

The government-recognised board, Al Hayatul Ulaya Lil Jamiatul Qaumia, made the "final decision" at a meeting at a madrasa in the capital's Jatra Bari area with board Chairman Maulana Mahmudul Hasan in the chair, it said in a statement.

Meanwhile, police claimed that top Hefajat leader Mamunul Haque has close links with a Pakistani militant outfit. The Hefajat joint secretary general, now on police remand, allegedly developed the links through his brother-in-law Mufi Niamatullah during his Pakistan visit in 2005.

Niamatullah was later arrested in connection with the August 21 grenade attack carried out by banned militant

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First jab of Covid vaccine suspended

Govt hopes to receive 1 lakh doses from Covax in May; another 20 lakh doses needed for second shots

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government suspended administering the first dose of the coronavirus vaccine yesterday, just a day after the Indian government said there will not be another shipment of the vaccine to Bangladesh anytime soon.

A circular issued by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) about the suspension didn't mention when the authorities might resume administering the first dose.

In another development, the DGHS said it needs 20 lakh doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine to continue providing people with their second jab.

"We asked Beximco to see if they can supply 20 lakh doses immediately," DGHS Director General Prof Abul Bashar Mohammad Khurshid Alam told The Daily Star yesterday.

The DGHS will receive one lakh doses of

the Pfizer vaccine from the COVAX facility by May, he said.

Besides, China has offered five lakh doses of its Sinopharm vaccine which has already been approved Bangladesh's drug administration. Officials hope that these doses will arrive by May.

Delhi on Saturday told Dhaka that the supply of the oxford vaccine will be delayed due to a shortage of raw materials and massive demand in India.

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

Nazmul Hassan Papon, managing director of Beximco pharma, said, "We hope that we will get some vaccine. But I can't tell for sure."

Health experts predict that the inoculation programme will suffer for a while unless a miracle happens.

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Border with India shut for 14 days

Govt declares amid worries over Covid surge; trade will go on

MOUJID AHMED SUJAN and PORIMOL PALMA

A day after the recommendation of the health directorate, the government yesterday shut down border with India from today amid severe surge in Covid-19 cases in the neighbouring country.

Passengers travel from India to Bangladesh via land will remain closed from today for 14 days, said Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen.

Already, air travel between India and Bangladesh has been suspended since April 14 with the beginning of second wave of Covid-19 from the second week of March in the country.

"We are closing it [border] for passengers for the time-being, but the trading will continue," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

The decision came at an inter-ministerial meeting of Prime Minister's

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NEWS ANALYSIS

FOOD GRAINS

Govt paid no heed as stock plunged

PINAKI ROY

It was obvious that the price of rice would increase amid the pandemic. No special expertise was required to see it coming.

But the government did not take any effective measure to stock up on food grains or regulate the price of rice.

Experts suggested keeping at least 12.5 lakh tonne of grains in stock. But the stock has now fallen to around four lakh tonne.

This unusually low level is the least since the stock of 2.8 lakh tonne in 2008, the year following super cyclone Sidr.

Last season, the country's total demand of food grains was 3.58 crore tonne.

In other words, the national demand is around 30 lakh tonne of food grains per month. But our current public food grains storage capacity is only 19 lakh tonne. The government is building five more warehouses and, once complete, the storage capacity of public food grains will reach 24 lakh tonne.

If the government wanted to feed all of the country from its public storage, the stocks would not last even for three weeks.

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Shopkeepers sitting outside their stores in the capital's New Market, waiting for customers yesterday afternoon. On the first day that shopping malls were allowed to stay open amid the restrictions to curb the spread of Covid-19, business was slow at the usually bustling New Market. Inset, shoppers going through the disinfection arch and having their temperatures checked before entering Bashundhara City Shopping Complex on Panthapath.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN AND PALASH KHAN



Malls reopen, roads see heavier traffic

People in droves return to capital as lockdown eases

SHAHEEN MOLLAH and MUNTAKIM SAAD

As the government allowed shops and shopping malls to reopen their doors for shoppers amid the "lockdown", a significant rise in public and vehicular movement was seen on the roads yesterday, with heavy traffic congestion in some areas of the capital.

At the same time, many people were seen returning to Dhaka from their districts through the entry points -- Babu Bazar, Amin Bazar Bridge and Tongi Bridge areas. Two ferry terminals on the Padma river saw large crowds from southern districts, ignoring the risks of contracting coronavirus while travelling.

After 11 consecutive days, shops and shopping malls reopened yesterday. Shopkeepers said the number of customers was low yesterday, as many people have gone back to their village homes. The owners think that crowds will get bigger once public transport resumes.

Visiting some major shopping malls and markets in the capital like New Market, Chandni Chawk, Gausia, Noor Mansion, Bashundhara City Shopping Mall, Shah Ali Shopping Complex, and Mirpur Muktijodha Supermarket, this correspondent found many shoppers pouring into the shops from 10:00am onwards due to the upcoming Eid-ul-Fitr.

However, an ongoing ban on public transport created an inconvenience for both shop owners, workers, and consumers.

People were seen travelling on rickshaws, three-wheelers, and even pickup trucks and horse carriages, especially in the old parts of Dhaka.

This correspondent found that only a few health safety guidelines were maintained in the markets.

At some market entry points, antiseptic mixture was sprayed instead of alcohol-mixed sanitizers. Besides, there was not enough room inside most of the shops to maintain physical distancing.

Heavy traffic congestion was seen in front of New Market and Bashundhara City Shopping Mall.

Md Sumon, proprietor of Baby Corner at Shah Ali Shopping Complex in Mirpur, which sells children's clothing, said the peak time for their business is pre-Eid. But this time, parents are scared to come to markets with their children because of the pandemic. Besides, people are also facing financial crises amid the "lockdown", he said.

Rabbi Islam Abir, who sells unstitched three-pieces at Chandni Chawk Market, told The Daily Star that customers used to buy products before the 15th of Ramadan since they later have to tailor the clothes.

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