

BANGLADESH UPDATE



2,922
New cases in 24hrs



7,45,322
Total cases



11,053
Deaths



6,57,452
Recoveries



3,119,698
Deaths



147,672,856
Total cases

Chinese defense minister due tomorrow

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Chinese State Councilor and Defense Minister Wei Fenghe is scheduled to arrive in Dhaka on a brief visit tomorrow, officials confirmed.

During his visit, he is scheduled to meet President Abdul Hamid and Bangladesh Chief of Army Staff General Aziz Ahmed.

A foreign ministry official told The Daily Star, "He will be visiting Dhaka on the occasion of the golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence and birth centenary of Bangabandhu."

Asked if there is any agenda on military cooperation with China, the official said he was not aware of it.

The visit of Wei Fenghe, who will also visit Sri Lanka after the Dhaka visit the same day, comes at a time when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang

Yi will virtually host a ministerial meeting with South Asian leaders of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka under a new initiative of China-South Asia Covid Cooperation and Post-pandemic Economic Recovery.



Wei Fenghe

The initiative comes amid rising cases of coronavirus infections in South Asian countries, mainly India where daily cases are on average 3.5 lakh. Bangladesh is also struggling to get vaccines after India banned the export of vaccines by the Serum Institute of India amid rising needs of inoculation for the

Indians and shortage of raw materials from the US.

Earlier this month, the Chief of Army Staff of Indian Army Gen Manoj Mukund Naravane also visited Bangladesh.



A long tailback of cars on Airport Road near the capital's Cantonment Railway Station. A bottleneck created by a police check point resulted in the tailback, even though no vehicles were being checked. The photo was taken yesterday morning.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Is Huji taking over Hefajat?

FROM PAGE 1

"We have already started identifying those [Afghanistan returnees] and will take actions against them," he also said.

During the three-day violence, several dozens of government establishments, railway stations, police stations and outposts came under unprecedented attacks by Hefajat activists.

WHAT HUJI WANTS

Investigators said Huji is not liking the present amir of Hefajat -- Junayed Babunagari -- as he was not working as per the will of the extremist outfit.

The militant group even wants to get someone to Hefajat's top post, someone who will be able to work without any government influence and will be able to run the Hathazari madrasa -- the centre of Hefajat activities, said the investigators.

The Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI), which was given the charge of investigation into 16 cases over the three-day mayhem, said it too found that Huji men were behind the violence.

Huji is carrying out its recruitment activities under the guise of Hefajat, said a top PBI official involved in the probe.

Wishing not to be named, another high PBI official said at least one central Hefajat leader was arrested in 2013 after he was found to be a Huji operative. The arrest was made over his alleged links with a blast at a madrasa in Chattogram's Lalkhan Bazar, said the official.

According to an intelligence report obtained by The Daily Star, the 249-member Hefajat central committee, which was dissolved last night, had at least eight leaders who are either former operatives of Huji or have connections with the militant outfit.

Intelligence officials said after the death of four Hefajat men on this March 26 at Hathazari, Chattogram, it's leaders, in the face of demands from Huji operatives, negotiated with law enforcers to take the bodies without any autopsies.

Tohidul Islam, additional deputy commissioner of Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit, said their investigation also found that a number of Huji operatives were holding posts in the Hefajat committee.

"These operatives are now trying to use the Hefajat banner to fulfill their purpose and carry out subversive activities in the country," he added.

Another intelligence report suggests that around a dozen Hefajat leaders have ties to another militant outfit -- Ansar al-Islam.

Asked about Hefajat's connections with militant groups, Anwar Hossain, deputy inspector general of police (Chattogram Range) told The Daily Star that they were trying to get an authentic picture in this regard.

Even Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, in a recent statement to the media, pointed fingers at Huji and Jamaat-Shibir men over the recent Hefajat mayhem.

While talking to The Daily Star before his arrest on April 12, Azizul Haq Islamabadi, central organising secretary of Hefajat, however, binned the allegation that militants groups have merged with his organisation.

"None of Hefajat leaders has anything to do with militancy. Why is the government not taking any action if it has any specific information in this regard?" he asked.

THREAT ASSESSMENT

Apart from the militant aid, Hefajat is also getting support from the BNP-Jamaat. It is now trying to be politically empowered to fulfil its agenda, according to a police intelligence report.

Inclusion of Huji operatives in Hefajat indicates that it may adopt ways to create anarchy, it said.

More than 30 Afgan returnees are

still absconding and reportedly more than 100 Huji members have fought in Arakan, Myanmar.

"The outfit members may work secretly to regroup as their potential leaders are staying outside the country, like in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Oman and Qatar. They may provide the necessary support, including financial assistance," reads the report.

Ongoing geo-political crisis due to Rohingya influx may create a favorable condition for expansion of the group in this territory, consequently, they may gain advantage in recruiting more sympathisers and in planning subversive activities, the report says.

Moreover, political backing by a few leading parties and religious groups may reinforce Huji's current strength, the intelligence feared.

POLITICAL AFFILIATION

Hefajat has also become the centre of attention of some leaders of major political parties to materialise their petty interests.

The platform is being used to gain popularity and achieve their political goals as Hefajat has thousands of dedicated followers across the country, according to experts and sources in the intelligence agencies.

At least six political parties took part in elections alone or under the platform of the BNP-Jamaat alliance have links with Hefajat.

The inclusion of leaders of Jamiyat-ul-Ulamaye Islam, a component of the 20-party alliance led by the BNP, is the prime example.

Thirty-one of its leaders made it to the 249-member committee of Hefajat. Jamiyat is registered with the Election Commission as a political party.

Eight top leaders of Khelafat Majlish, another component of the BNP-led alliance, were also included in the new committee.

At least 23 leaders of Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish, four of Islami Oikya Jote, and five of Khelafat Andolon were accommodated in the Hefajat's new committee.

Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish and Islami Oikya Jote earlier were in the BNP-led alliance and both are registered with the Election Commission as political parties.

Five Jamaat men also got into the Hefajat committee, according to competent sources.

On November 15, Junayed Babunagari was declared Hefajat ameer at the end of its council held at Darul Ulum Moinul Islam Hathazari Madrasa in Chattogram. Before the committee was announced, Junayed served Hefajat as its secretary general. The council was held around two months after the death of Hefajat ameer Ahmed Shafi, who passed away in September.

Hefajat first appeared on the scene in 2009 by protesting a draft national women development policy that provided equal inheritance rights to women.

Things changed after the 2013 mayhem at Shapla Chattar, and the then Hefajat ameer Shah Ahmad Shafi and the AL government got closer.

But a faction of Hefajat, led by Junayed Babunagari, was totally against the outfit's "soft approach" towards the government, according to several Hefajat leaders.

Soon after the formation of the central committee, Hefajat hogged the headlines as it strongly opposed the construction of Bangabandhu's sculpture in the capital and gave anti-government statements.

RCC mayor sues

FROM PAGE 1

The Daily Star tried to reach Ratan for comments but failed.

In the case, the mayor brought allegations that Ratan made the Facebook post against him for interrupting the continuous development of RCC.

Malls reopen, roads see heavier traffic

FROM PAGE 1

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, reads the report.

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. But this time, there is not enough customers yet, he said.

Rakibul Hasan, owner of Afia World at Bashundhara Shopping Mall, said that although they could open shops for a limited time, it wouldn't bring much profit.

"The rent of this shop is Tk 60,000 per month. Besides, we have four staff. Since the last year, we are facing huge losses," Rakibul said.

Eid-ul-Fitr is generally the busiest time for businesses but last year's Eid was celebrated amid the Covid-19 outbreak and businesses suffered huge losses, they said.

Sellers at New Market said that they expected more customers ahead of Eid. Shop owners are, however, happy that they could reopen after 11 days.

"Eid is nearby. It's very hot during the day time. Many people would like to shop after Iftar," said Asgar Ahmed, a readymade garments shop owner at Bashundhara Shopping Mall.

Disregarding the timing, many shops were found open and operating till night yesterday in some parts of the city.

The announcement that shops and malls would reopen from April 25 also gave a sense of relief to city dwellers. The road transport minister yesterday even hinted that public transport may also resume after April 28.

Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader yesterday said the government will be forced to impose strict lockdown again if people do not follow health guidelines once public transport services are resumed after the ongoing lockdown ends.

He called for strict adherence to safety rules in shopping malls, shops and markets.

TRAFFIC CONGESTION ON ROADS
The pressure of vehicles on city streets was higher than other days during the ongoing "lockdown".

Visiting some key spots in the capital like Mirpur, Gabtoli, Shyamoli, Airport Road, Banani, Uttara, Mohakhali, Dhanmondi and Farmgate, this correspondent found moderate to high traffic congestion on the streets.

On Airport road, Mohakhali, Tejgaon, Rampura and Badda, there were tailbacks from morning to noon with hundreds of private cars, CNG-run auto-rickshaws and goods-laden covered vans and trucks, plying the road. In the afternoon, there were traffic congestions on Panthapath and

Mirpur road.

However, no public transport was seen on the city streets.

Although police said those who will come out of their houses for shopping will need a "movement pass", in reality, there was no effort to check those. This correspondent crossed several checkpoints in some key-points of the city where police were seen sitting idle.

In a circular on Friday, the government allowed shops and shopping malls to remain open from 10:00AM, prompting many people to return to the capital.

Meanwhile, the closure time of the businesses has increased from 5:00PM to 9:00PM.

Md Helal Uddin, president of Bangladesh Dokan Malik Samity, said that they had a talk with Dhaka Metropolitan Police yesterday when they got permission to keep the shops and shopping malls open till 9:00PM in the metropolitan area.

DMP Commissioner Shafiqul Islam told The Daily Star that it's a government decision and they conveyed the message to the shop owners.

Meanwhile, although ferries were supposed to carry vehicles for emergency services only, they were forced to carry small vehicles across the Padma as well. Many people, especially the low-wage earners, crossed the river on trawlers and speedboats, ignoring health restrictions.

A similar scenario was found at the Paturia-Daulatdia ferry terminal.

With Covid-19 cases continuing to rise alarmingly from mid-March, the government imposed a nationwide "lockdown" for one week from April 5.

Later, a week-long "stricter lockdown" was declared from April 14, which has been extended till April 28.

Hefajat disbands central committee

FROM PAGE 1

Kamal said different militant outfits that were crushed in the past are now trying to create anarchy in the country again under Hefajat's banner.

Earlier on April 20, in a confessional statement before Dhaka Chief Judicial Magistrate's Court, Hefajat Assistant Finance Secretary Muhammad Ilias Hamidi said the Islamist outfit's recent violent activities were aimed at toppling the government.

Hefajat is now trying to negotiate with the government which continues its crackdown on the outfit's top leaders.

In a bid to convince the government, a Hefajat delegation met the home minister at his residence on April 19 and assured him that students of Qawmi madrasas will not get involved in any anti-government or anti-state activities.

In another development yesterday, the combined Islamic education board of Qawmi madrasas 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 with board Chairman Maulana Mahmudul Hasan in the chair, it said in a statement.

Meanwhile, police claimed that Hefajat Joint Secretary General Mamunul Haque has close links with a Pakistani militant outfit. Mamunul, now on remand, allegedly developed the links during his Pakistan visit in 2005 with the help of his brother-in-law Mufti Niamatullah.

Niamatullah was later arrested in connection with the August 21 grenade attack carried out by banned militant outfit Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (Huji) in 2004. He also had close ties with Maulana Tajuddin, who was sentenced to death in the grenade attack case.

BOARD MEETING

Yesterday's decision by the combined board came amid the government's persistent pressure to exclude from it the Hefajat leaders involved in the March 26-28 violence in different parts of the country, said sources.

The board arranges central examinations for Qawmi madrasas

and issues certificates.

At least a dozen Hefajat leaders, who hold various posts in the board, attended the meeting.

Seeking anonymity, two of them told this newspaper that they made the decision following the government's continued pressure to axe from the board the Hefajat leaders who have links to last month's mayhem.

MAMUNUL'S 'PAKISTAN LINK'
Harun-Or Rashid, DMP deputy commissioner (Tejgaon Division), said Mamunul had stayed in Pakistan for 45 days in 2005 and collected a module of a political party in that country. He later tried to apply it to Hefajat.

Talking to reporters at his office yesterday, Harun further said they learnt about it while interrogating Mamunul who is now on seven-day remand in a vandalism case filed with Mohammadpur Police Station.

The DMP official further said they found evidence of huge financial transactions involving Mamunul by examining his mobile phone.

"Mamunul was collecting money from Pakistan, Dubai and Qatar, using the name of Babri mosque in India. He later used these funds to train students at different mosques and madrasas in the country," said Harun without giving details.

MORE CASES

Two more cases were filed against Mamunul yesterday with Paltan Police Station over vandalism, arson and sabotage at Baitul Mukarram mosque on March 26.

Three joint secretaries general of Hefajat -- Lokman Hakim, Junayed Al Habib and Nasir Uddin Monir -- were also made accused in the cases, according to first information reports.

Abab Ahmed Rizvi and Rumam Sheikh -- both activists of the Awami League -- filed the cases.

Asked, Syed Nurul Islam, DMP deputy commissioner (Motijheel Division), said they already started probing the cases.

According to sources at the police headquarters, at least 143 cases have been filed so far over acts of violence in different parts of the country from March 26 to 28.

Meanwhile, the Detective Branch of Police has taken Mamunul's father-in-

law Oliyur Rahman into custody.

Oliyur, a freedom fighter and a former member of the army, lives in Faridpur.

Contacted, Md Ohidujman, officer-in-charge of Alfadanga Police Station in Faridpur, said, "Oliyur was not detained or arrested. Detectives from Dhaka Metropolitan Police took him to the capital to quiz him."

Earlier on April 21, Oliyur, father of Mamunul's second wife, was suspended from the post of ward-4 president of Gopalpur Union AL unit.

HEFAJAT'S CENTRAL COMMITTEE
On November 15 last year, Babunagari was declared Hefajat amir at the end of its council held at Darul Ulum Moinul Islam Hathazari Madrasa in Chattogram. Before that, he was secretary general of the outfit.

The council was held around two months after the death of Hefajat supreme Shah Ahmad Shafi in September that year.

Soon after the formation of the 249-member central committee, Hefajat hogged the headlines as it strongly opposed the construction of Bangabandhu's sculpture in the capital and gave anti-government statements.

Later, tension between the government and Hefajat over the issue eased following meetings between the two sides.

Hefajat drew fresh attention of the government when it opposed Modi's Bangladesh visit on March 26, the day the country celebrated the golden jubilee of its independence.

Following Hefajat's three-day mayhem in different parts of the country, the government launched a crackdown on the Islamist outfit.

Hefajat first appeared on the scene in 2009 by protesting a draft national women development policy that provided equal inheritance rights to women.

Things changed after the 2013 mayhem at Shapla Chattar, and the then Hefajat amir Shafi and the AL government got closer.

But a faction of Hefajat, led by Babunagari, was totally against the outfit's "soft approach" towards the government, according to several Hefajat leaders.

Border with India

FROM PAGE 1

Minister's Office, home ministry, Cabinet Division, health, commerce, BGB, and Bangladesh missions in India were present.

According to a foreign ministry statement, Bangladeshi citizens in India for treatment with validity visas of less than 15 days could enter Bangladesh through Benapole, Akhaura and Burimari only after taking permission from Bangladesh missions in New Delhi, Kolkata, and Agartala and with a mandatory Covid-negative certificate done through PCR test within 72 hours of entry.

People entering Bangladesh through this process would have to stay officially quarantined for two weeks. Except for the three land ports, all kinds of human movements through all other land ports between the two countries would completely suspended for two weeks.

The vehicles carrying goods from India would have to be properly sterilised before entering Bangladesh borders. The drivers and helpers concerned would have to follow the Covid-19 safety protocol strictly.

Railroads would be encouraged for export and import of goods between the two countries in this period, said the statement.

The Indian High Commission in Dhaka has advised the Indian nationals in Bangladesh to communicate to the mission if they need to travel to India.

"The specific process in such cases is being worked out with the Bangladesh authorities. In the meantime, however, those Indians who need to travel home to India may send tentative travel plans by email to the High Commission at cons1.dhaka@mea.gov.in and cons.dhaka@mea.gov.in," the high commission said in a message.

Sources, meanwhile, said the decision over the ongoing countrywide movement restrictions that will end on Wednesday may come in today's cabinet meeting.

During this surge, the country saw the record-breaking number of deaths and infections continuously which forced the government to enforce the ongoing movement restrictions from April 5.

Since April 16, the positivity rate started going down. The rate was 13.33 percent yesterday.

Meanwhile, the Directorate General of Health Services reported 101 people died from Covid-19 in 24 hours ending at 8:00am yesterday. The figure was 83 the previous day.

With yesterday's casualties, the total number of deaths reached 11,053 and the death rate was 1.48 percent.

In this period, 2,922 more people tested positive for Covid-19, raising the total active cases to 76,817.

Due to the fresh surge of the infection, the DGHS made a set of recommendations, including not to go for complete reopening now and closure of land border with India.

Experts have also suggested closing the borders with the neighbouring country to contain the spread of a new and potentially more transmissible variant of the virus.

"The variant that has spread across India is extremely deadly. It is 300 times more transmissible. Unless health safety guidelines are maintained strictly, the situation here may turn worst..." Prof Robed Amin, spokesperson and director of non-communicable disease control programme at the DGHS, said at a bi-weekly virtual briefing yesterday.

In Tuesday's meeting, the National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) on Covid-19 also recommended that the borders should not reopen until the situation in India improves.

The new variant, which has a so-called double mutation, is reported to be fuelling India's second wave of coronavirus cases that has made it the world's second worst Covid-hit country, surpassing Brazil.

India has reported more than 15 million Covid-19 cases so far and more than 175,600 fatalities.

In another development, while there was a serious reservation among the experts as well as the health department, the foreign ministry on Thursday reduced the institutional quarantine period for people returning from abroad to five days from 14 days.

The decision did not comply with the 14-day quarantine rules being imposed as per the experts' suggestion.

Health officials said the decision was not scientific at all.

During yesterday's briefing, Robed said, "We [DGHS] have been repeatedly asking for cooperation so that the Indian variant could not enter Bangladesh. Quarantine must be for 14 days."

"But the health directorate is not the only institution to ensure this; it requires the cooperation from other ministries and departments," he said, expressing concern.

He added that if the institutional quarantine for 14 days is tough to implement, they still would urge for 14 days' home quarantine.

While shops and shopping malls were opened yesterday, the government is also considering lifting restrictions on vehicular movement after April 28.

"In this situation, people have to follow strict health rules. Traders must adhere to the no mask, no service policy when selling goods," said Robed.

Mentioning that the vaccine is not the only tool to prevent Covid-19, he said, "One of the most proven ways in the world is to maintain physical distance. There are a lot of evidence about the effectiveness of the mask. So, we have to follow this."

Talking to The Daily Star, Prof ABM Khurshid Alam, DGHS director general, said, "We have sent our recommendations to the health ministry yesterday [Saturday]. Now it's up to the high-ups of the government to decide."

"But there is no alternative to maintaining health rules to survive this surge," he added.