

BANGLADESH UPDATE



2,922
New cases in 24hrs



7,45,322
Total cases



11,053
Deaths



6,57,452
Recoveries



3,117,175
Deaths



147,446,875
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 for 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's 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 present 249-member Hefajat committee has 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 fulfill 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 more 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 new 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 new committee, Hefajat hogged the headlines as it strongly opposed the construction of Bangabandhu's sculpture in the capital and gave anti-government statements.

Malls reopen, roads see heavier traffic

FROM PAGE 1

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 check-posts 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.

Border with India shut for 14 days

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Office, Cabinet Division, foreign and home ministries. The Cabinet Division was supposed to issue a circular in this regard.

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 continuously went down. The rate was 13.33 percent yesterday, thanks to the restrictions, say experts.

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.

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 hospitals have still been struggling with rising number of patients requiring critical care.

In this context, 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 the neighbouring country India is extremely deadly. It is 300 times more transmissible. Unless health safety guidelines are maintained strictly, the

situation here may turn worst as like as in the neighbouring country," Prof Dr 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.

Bangladesh High Commission in India has also opined in favour of closing borders with India for passengers temporarily, except for the extreme emergency cases.

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, after the US.

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

The new variant, called B.1.617, was initially detected in India with two mutations -- the E484Q and L452R. It was first reported late last year by a scientist in India and more details were presented before the WHO recently.

In another development, while there was a serious reservation among the experts as well as the health department, the foreign ministry on Thursday decreased the institutional quarantine period 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 is not scientific at all.

During yesterday's briefing, Dr Robed Amin 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 of 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 what to decide."

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

DAILY UPDATE

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

Besides, the total number of recoveries rose to 6,57,452 and the recovery rate stood at 87.56 percent.

Among yesterday's 101 deaths, 52 were and 49 women.

Bombs hurled at Quader's sister's home

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Noakhali

A group of criminals hurled bombs at the house of Tahera Begum, Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader's younger sister, in Noakhali's Companiganj upazila early yesterday.

According to police, none was hurt in the incident but fear and panic gripped the area afterwards.

Tahera Begum's son Miraj said, "Some five to six cocktails were hurled targeting their house around midnight. The attackers fled the scene as locals rushed to the spot hearing bombing."

He also alleged that the followers of Quader Mirza, Obaidul Quader's younger brother and his maternal uncle, were involved in the incident.

He accused three people -- Keccha Rashed, Saju and Dilip -- of the bombing.

Contacted, Mir Zahidul Haque Rony, officer-in-charge of Companiganj Police Station, said they rushed to the spot on information and recovered unexploded bombs.

Additional law enforcers have been deployed to avert any further untoward incident. Further legal steps would be taken after investigation, he added.

Earlier on April 16, a miscreants' group hurled bombs at Obaidul Quader's native home in the upazila.

Politics in Companiganj started getting volatile since Quader Mirza began making comments against corruption and misdeeds committed by the AL men in Noakhali and Feni for the last few months.

On multiple occasions, he even came down heavily on government officials for their alleged involvement with corrupt politicians.

He also repeatedly criticised his brother Obaidul Quader and his wife for patronising corrupt politicians.

Two deadly clashes had even occurred there between two AL groups over establishing supremacy.

Qawmi teachers

FROM PAGE 1

outfit Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (Huji) in 2004. He also had close ties with Maulana Tajuddin, who was awarded death penalty in the grenade attack case.

Yesterday's decision by the board came amid the government's persistent pressure to exclude from it the Hefajat leaders involved in March 26-28 violence in different parts of the country in protest of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit, Hefajat sources told The Daily Star.

Al Hayatul Ulaya Lil Jamiatul Qaumia is the parent organisation of six Qawmi madrasa education boards. It arranges the central examinations for Qawmi madrasas and issues certificates.

At least a dozen Hefajat leaders who hold various posts in Al Hayatul Ulaya Lil Jamiatul Qaumia attended yesterday's 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 involved in political activities and have links to last month's three-day mayhem that left at least 17 people dead.

They further said Hefajat is now under tremendous pressure from the government to restructure its committee by removing from it the Hefajat leaders involved in the recent violent activities and has direct involvement in different political parties.

The Qawmi madrasa-based organisation is now trying to negotiate with the government which continues to crack down on its top leaders.

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

As of yesterday, 19 top Hefajat leaders and around 800 activists of the Islamist outfit were arrested across the country over acts of violence.

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, 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 any details.

At a separate briefing, the home minister told reporters that crushed militant outfits that were diffused in the past are now trying to create anarchy in the country again under Hefajat's banner.

First jab of Covid

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"The government must manage the Oxford vaccine for those who took its first jab. And at the same time, they should find out other sources," said Sayedur Rahman, chairman of pharmacology at the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University Hospital.

He added that China's Sinopharm and Russia's Sputnik V are good options.

Besides, a Bangladeshi drug maker has informed the government that it can produce the Moderna and Jonson & Jonson vaccines and it had communicated both the companies.

"We asked the local company to submit the relevant documents mentioning the cost," Prof Khurshid told The Daily Star.

The DGHS is trying to ensure the Sinopharm and Sputnik V arrive soon,

he added.

The government on December 13 last year signed a deal with Serum Institute of India on purchasing 3 crore doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine. As per the deal, Bangladesh was supposed to get 50 lakh doses a month.

As of yesterday, only 70 lakh doses have been shipped to Bangladesh. The Indian government had sent an additional 33 lakh doses as gift.