

BANGLADESH UPDATE

3,031
New cases in 24hrs

7,51,659
Total cases

11,228
Deaths

6,66,927
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

3,142,675
Deaths

149,135,673
Total cases

TACKLING COVID-19

China keen on working with Bangladesh

Visiting Chinese defence minister says

BSS, Dhaka

Chinese Defence Minister Gen Wei Fenghe yesterday said his country was keen to extend cooperation to Bangladesh in tackling the Covid-19 outbreak.

He said this when he paid a courtesy call on President Abdul Hamid at the Bangabhaban in the afternoon, president's Press Secretary Md Joyal Abedin told BSS after the meeting.

The Chinese minister said his country would continue its strategic cooperation in the development of Bangladesh armed forces as the military cooperation between the two countries was increasing gradually.

Referring to the Rohingya repatriation, he said, "China is also working to resolve the Rohingya problem."

Welcoming the Chinese defence minister to Dhaka, the president said China is one of the most important development partners of Bangladesh.

China's relations with Bangladesh are gradually expanding in various fields, including trade and investment, Hamid said.

The head of the state said Chinese investment in various sectors, including infrastructure and communication, is playing a very significant role in the socio-economic development of Bangladesh.

Emphasising on strengthening bilateral and multilateral relations in tackling the pandemic, the president told the visiting minister that Bangladesh was keen to work with China in this regard. "Bangladesh is also eager to take joint initiatives in research and production of coronavirus vaccine."

Hamid reiterated his call to China for playing a role in repatriating the forcibly displaced Rohingyas as it maintains very good relations with Myanmar.

He hoped that China would take effective steps in this regard.



Visiting Chinese Defence Minister Gen Wei Fenghe calls on President Abdul Hamid at the Bangabhaban yesterday.

PHOTO: PID

City poor barely on govt's mind

FROM PAGE 1

Though the government has made considerable progress in expanding the social safety net over the years, the country's urban poor have negligible access to the benefits.

A government survey in December last year revealed that the social safety net schemes fail to cover millions of urban people facing food insecurity.

The open market sale (OMS), a subsidised food distribution programme, for example, covers only 1 percent of the poor urban households while 2 percent urban poor are supported by old-age allowance, said the survey conducted by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS).

"Despite the government's commitment to uplifting the poor, there is a lack of social safety net programmes for urban poor. Available information suggests that millions of food insecure urban people still remain uncovered," said the survey titled "Urban Socioeconomic Assessment Survey (USAS) 2019".

The BBS surveyed 2,150 households in city corporation areas across the country from December 8 to 26 last year. But the study, the first of its kind, did not reflect the impact of the Covid pandemic.

There are around 81 lakh beneficiaries under the programmes which include OMS, income security for the elderly, widows, and persons with disabilities, and pension schemes for retired government employees and their families.

According to an estimate of the BIDS, the countrywide shutdown caused 80 percent drop in income of the people belonging to the labouring class in urban areas and 10 percent drop in income of the same segment of population in rural areas.

Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) prepared the report titled "Poverty in the time of Corona: Trends, Drivers, Vulnerability and Policy Responses in Bangladesh" in June last year to assess the fallout of the Covid-induced shutdown.

NO GOOD NEWS FOR URBAN POOR
With the ongoing restrictions extended

till May 5, there is no good news for the urban poor this time as the government decided not to sell rice at a subsidised rate (Tk 10 a kg) through its OMS outlets.

Food ministry officials said the government made such a decision because of the dwindling food stock.

Food Secretary Mosammat Nazmanara Khanum said the government is continuing open market sale of coarse varieties of rice for Tk 30 a kg from 874 trucks across the country.

"We have informed the finance ministry that we will not be able to sell rice at Tk 10 per kg through OMS because of the dwindling food stock. The government has to give cash incentives instead of rice," she told The Daily Star.

The government's food reserve dwindled to 4.62 lakh tonnes on April 20. In July last year, it had a rice stock of 11.20 lakh tonnes, which was 15.99 lakh tonnes on July 1, 2019.

The food secretary further said the government had sold 86,000 tonnes of rice at Tk 10 per kg through the OMS in city corporation areas all over the country from April to June last year.

Last year's BBS survey found that the existing safety net portfolio has grown in an unplanned manner with duplication resulting from incorrect targeting, leakage and a lack of coordination.

"There are several effective social safety nets in urban areas, yet the coverage is negligible," it pointed out.

NEED FOR DATABASE, GOV-NGO COLLABORATION
Experts say the pandemic and the lockdown have exacerbated the pre-existing inequities in the safety net coverage with exposure being significantly higher in rural areas than the urban ones.

The rural people have some scopes such as farming and small sales of farm products. But the urban poor have to buy everything with price hike of essentials adding to their woes amid a decline in their income, they mentioned.

The experts stressed the need for designing a social security system for

the urban poor, keeping in mind the rapid urbanisation and sharp increase in the number of slum dwellers. Participation of local government bodies and non-government organisations is also vital to reach the target population.

Noted economist Binayak Sen thinks the poor people in urban areas do not get the benefits of social safety programmes for a lack of comprehensive household database.

If there is a database, the government could reach the beneficiaries during this pandemic, he noted.

Binayak, director general of the BIDS, said social protection programmes should be carried out through coordinated efforts involving both government and non-government organisations.

"Our strength is GO-NGO collaboration. And the cooperation and collaboration have become all too important at this crucial time of pandemic," he told The Daily Star.

There are many NGOs working in urban areas, he said, adding that it will be possible to reach the target population in these areas if the NGOs are involved in the government's safety net schemes.

Contacted, Md Mohsin, secretary at the disaster management and relief ministry, admitted that poor people in urban areas do not get much of the safety net facilities.

"The government has made allocations for those affected by the pandemic and the lockdown. Part of it is being earmarked for the urban poor no matter how nominal the allocation is," he mentioned.

The secretary said they are taking measures this time so that the urban poor are not deprived of the facilities.

"We are now roping in the representatives of city corporations and other local government bodies to develop distribution mechanisms as they are the ones who can help us reach the target population."

Asked about involving NGOs in safety net schemes, Mohsin said the government has no plan in this regard at this moment.

No work order in rest of fiscal year

FROM PAGE 1

The directive came into effect immediately, according to the circular.

The circular reads no "Notification of Award" can be issued for any physical works (construction/structure) under the revenue and development budget in the remainder of the current fiscal year to combat the ongoing pandemic situation following the government's austerity policy.

The fiscal year ends on June 30. However, physical works of the work orders already been given will continue as usual.

After the completion of the bidding process, the project implementing authorities issue "Notification of Award" to the successful bidder and then sign relevant contracts with it for project works.

Different ministries and divisions, including the Road Transport and Highway Division, have already asked its agencies to comply with the finance ministry's directive.

The move came at a time when the country is going through some restrictions imposed on the movement of people and public transport to contain the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, works of different construction projects, including the high priority fast track ones, will continue, albeit not in the usual pace due to problems related to workers and supply of construction materials.

WHY SUCH A DECISION?
The country's economic activities were hit hard after the government imposed a two-month coronavirus-driven shutdown from March last year.

As the situation improved slightly, the activities were coming back on tracks gradually. The second wave of the pandemic, however, has once again slowed things down.

Following the government's austerity policy due to the pandemic, the finance ministry in July last year had halted the Annual Development Programme (government portion) for the "low-priority projects".

The "low-priority projects" account

for 30 percent of the total project cost of any particular ministry.

With the improvement in revenue collection, the finance ministry later in October changed the decision. It then asked to halt 25 percent ADP funds from all development projects.

While approving the revised ADP last month, the finance ministry further softened its stance on the disbursement of funds from ADP. Now, any ministry would be allowed to use 85 percent of ADP allocated for the projects.

But the situation started to change again after the surge in Covid-19 cases and death since last month.

The authorities' possible additional expenditure for the health sector, especially for procuring Covid-19 vaccines, finance assistance to low income people affected by the pandemic and low revenue collection prompted the government to come up with the new directive, finance ministry officials said.

The government has to take majors preparations to fight the second wave and it needs funds for this, they said.

It is now planning to procure vaccines from China and Russia after the Indian government suspended exports of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine being manufactured at Serum Institute of India. Officials believe the prices of the Chinese and Russian vaccines will be higher than the one bought from India.

Moreover, the government has to spend more for the low income people, who are hit hard by the ongoing Covid-driven "lockdown", the officials said.

Besides, project implementing agencies tend to spend allocated money in the last two or three months of the fiscal year and in many cases this tendency leads to waste of money, they added.

Around 41.92 percent of the ADP target has been achieved till March, show documents.

"Keeping all these aspects in mind, the government took the [new] decision as a precautionary measure," said a finance ministry official, wishing not to be named.

Meanwhile, a deputy secretary of the ministry said the government's income from VAT and other sectors has been low this fiscal year and the National Board of Revenue is struggling to achieve its target.

"It is also not clear how this Covid situation will turn out to be. Considering all these, the government took the decision," the official said.

The NBR had set a target to collect Tk 2,27,764.36 crore in the first nine months of the fiscal year, but it managed to get Tk 1,78,263.18 till March, which is around 22 percent short of the target, show NBR documents.

WHAT IMPLEMENTING AGENCIES SAY

Abdus Sabur, chief engineer of the Roads and Highways Department, which is now implementing around 200 development projects, said they have received the circular.

"We will implement the directive after talking with our higher and field level-officials," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

However, sources at the RHD said there was an ambiguity regarding the directive and RHD authorities will hold a meeting with the road transport and highway division secretary today to clarify the issue.

An RHD official said they received a particular amount of allocation for the projects and they need clarification regarding whether they need not issue any "Notification of Award" even after having allocated money.

"We might have to send the money back," he said, wishing anonymity.

Besides, there are projects, which would take more than two or three years to complete and contractors may be given money in the next fiscal year, he said. "Our question is whether we have to halt issuance of notification of award in that case," he said.

Bangladesh Railway is now executing 39 projects.

BR Director General Dharendra Nath Mazumder told The Daily Star last night, "I have heard about such a directive and will take next steps after our offices will reopen [after the ongoing restrictions]."

College girl found dead

FROM PAGE 1

A Dhaka court yesterday issued a travel ban on Anvir after police submitted a petition seeking a travel ban.

The deceased was a college student hailing from Cumilla.

The body was hanging from the ceiling fan in her bedroom. Her legs were touching the bed and both knees were a little bent, said the victim's sister in the case statement.

While the complainant accused Tanvir of abetting the death by suicide in the first information report (FIR), the victim's brother-in-law told journalists yesterday that his sister-in-law was murdered.

He talked to journalists at the morgue of Dhaka Medical College from where he received the body after autopsy. Samples were collected from the body for DNA and viscera tests.

"My sister died between 11:00am and 4:30pm on Monday with direct and indirect instigation of Anvir," the complainant mentioned in the case statement.

As evidence, police seized the victim's pictures with Anvir, her diary where she wrote about her love affair with him and two mobile phones.

The victim's body was taken back to Cumilla and buried yesterday evening.

Her brother told our Cumilla correspondent that their father was a freedom fighter who died in 2015, and their mother passed away in 2018.

CASE DETAILS

According to the case statement, in 2019, Anvir took the victim to a rented flat in the city's Banani and they started living together.

Last year, Anvir's family came to know about his relation with the victim and his mother threatened the victim with dire consequences, asking her to leave Dhaka, the complainant said in the FIR.

The accused, Anvir, then sent the victim to Cumilla assuring her that he would marry her later, the FIR added.

According to the FIR, on March 1, the victim's sister and brother-in-law rented the Gulshan flat using their national identity cards at the insistence of Anvir.

After the flat was rented, Anvir brought the victim to the flat in Gulshan from Cumilla, it added.

"I heard from my sister [victim] that accused Anvir will settle abroad after marrying her as his parents may kill my sister if they came to know about their relationship," the complainant said in the case statement.

Since March 1, Anvir had visited the flat at different times.

The complainant said the victim called her on April 23 and said Anvir had scolded her because she went to the residence of the owner of the rented flat and the owner's wife took her photo and uploaded it on Facebook.

Anvir scolded her saying that she visited the residence of his enemies, the case statement added.

The accused also told the victim that his mother would come to know everything after her picture was uploaded. Anvir then said he would travel to Dubai on April 27 and asked the victim to go back to Cumilla.

The complainant said her sister called her mobile phone at 9:00am on April 25 and told her that Anvir would not marry her and had scolded her. She also said she is in trouble and an accident may happen any time.

The victim also asked her to come to Dhaka as soon as possible.

The complainant said on her way to Dhaka the following day she had

called her sister repeatedly, but the victim did not answer. Around 4:15pm she reached the flat and pressed the doorbell but none answered.

When she informed the flat owner, the manager of the building called a mechanic who broke the lock and she found her sister hanging from the ceiling fan in her bedroom.

Police rushed to the flat and recovered the body after being informed by the manager.

Talking to this correspondent, the son-in-law of the flat owner said they rented out the flat when the victim, her sister and brother-in-law came and said they would live there.

"Later, we came to know that only the victim was living there," the flat owner's son-in-law said.

Asked, he said they did not know whether the Bashundhara MD used to go there.

"All are captured on CCTV footage which police took away. They can track it," he said.

He added that it was a three-bedroom flat and the rent is Tk 1 lakh with a service charge of Tk 11,000.

Sudip Chakrabarty, deputy commissioner of Gulshan division police, said, "We are investigating the allegations. If we find primary evidence against the accused, we will go for legal action against him."

Police initially found evidence that the victim was acquainted with Anvir, who used to visit her there, the DC said.

Another police official said there are many photos of the man with the girl in the flat. Digital devices used by the deceased were seized for forensic analysis.

BAN ON TRAVEL

Yesterday, Investigation Officer of the case Abul Hasan, officer-in-charge of Gulshan Police Station, submitted a petition to a Dhaka court seeking a travel ban on Anvir as he may leave the country to avoid arrest.

After the hearing, the magistrate directed police authorities to send the order sheet to the chief of the special branch (immigration) to take further steps in this regard. The court directed the IO to submit a probe report on the case by May 30.

A news outlet had published a report yesterday claiming that Anvir had already left the country on Monday evening.

When asked, a top official of Aviation Security (AVSEC) at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport said they have information that the Bashundhara MD tried to leave the country on Monday but eventually could not.

"We also have information that he is still trying to leave the country," he added.

The AVSEC official also said that the Bashundhara MD's wife left the country on Monday evening on a cargo flight. The departure documents kept at the VIP gate recorded that the "wife of Sayem Sobhan" left HSI on a cargo flight at 4:30pm on Monday.

The Daily Star could not independently confirm whether the Bashundhara MD or his wife actually left the country.

The Daily Star tried repeatedly to call a mobile number that is believed to be Anvir's but found it busy.

The newspaper also called and texted Mohammad Abu Tayeb, Bashundhara Group's media adviser, but he neither answered nor replied.

As per the editorial policy of The Daily Star, we did not use the victim's photo or reveal her identity.

Govt gives nod to Sputnik V

FROM PAGE 1

importing and administering the vaccine in Bangladesh. Health officials said they can resume the first dose of vaccination once they get the Russian vaccine.

"The government will now bring the Russian Covid-19 vaccine to the country and it can be administered. Russia will give us 40 lakh doses in May and June," Maj Gen Mahbubur Rahman, director general of Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA), told The Daily Star.

He said Sputnik V will be administered as the first dose.

Sputnik is the second vaccine the DGDA approved after Covishield - the AstraZeneca vaccine produced by Serum - on January 4.

Asked about the price of the vaccine, the DG of the DGDA said the Russian and Bangladeshi governments will discuss and finalise the price.

Mahbubur said the vaccine, registered in around 60 countries, is currently in use in some of those countries and that its efficacy level is very good.

Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Myanmar have already approved Sputnik V. India has recently approved the use of Sputnik V as the country faces shortages of jobs amid an intensifying second wave of the deadly virus.

Russia approved the Sputnik V vaccine for domestic use in August last year. It claimed that its efficacy is around 91 percent, but the vaccine is yet to get approval from the World Health Organization.

Last week, Health Minister Zahid Maleque told The Daily Star that Russia has already offered to sell Bangladesh around 2.5 crore doses of Sputnik V by December this year in phases, or provide assistance in producing the shots locally.

The Russian government also offered to export a further 3.5 crore doses in phases by April next year.

Bangladesh has also sought vaccine from China and wants it as soon as possible.

"They [China] said they would work with us," Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen told reporters yesterday following a virtual foreign ministers' meeting involving China, Bangladesh,

Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

This is the first meeting of the China-led initiative called "China-South Asia Platform for Covid-19 Consultation, Cooperation, and Post-pandemic Economic Recovery".

Under the platform, China proposed establishing Covid-19 emergency medical facilities, poverty alleviation, and e-commerce in rural areas.

Earlier, Sinopharm - a Chinese state-owned enterprise - had committed to giving six lakh doses of vaccine to Bangladesh free of cost and the organisation also said they are capable of supplying around 15 lakh doses per week, said health officials.

Asked, DGDA DG Mahbubur said the emergency usage authorisation for Sinopharm vaccine will be given once they get the documents from the organisation.

With the Serum Institute of India failing to comply with the commitment to supply three crore vaccine shots in six instalments, the Bangladesh government started to explore alternative sources for the jobs and found Sputnik V and Sinopharm suitable.

But the concern about the second AstraZeneca dose for those who have already taken the first jab is yet to be resolved.

Around 35 lakh people are yet to get their second jab of the AstraZeneca vaccine, but the government only has around 20 lakh doses in hand.

Health officials said the vaccines in hand will run out within two weeks. If more AstraZeneca doses are not secured by then, the second-dose campaign will be hampered, they feared.

Md Sayedur Rahman, chairman of pharmacology department at BSMMU, told The Daily Star on Monday that Oxford researchers had demonstrated that a 12 weeks' gap between doses of AstraZeneca provides maximum protection.

"The UK government is continuing their vaccination programme with 12 weeks' interval [between doses]. Even Canada is giving [the second dose] after 16 weeks [of administering the first dose]. So, the Bangladesh government has eight additional weeks in hand to manage the vaccine," he said.