

Govt starts buying of paddy

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government started procurement of paddy directly from farmers at Tk 27 per kg from yesterday.

Food Minister Sadhan Chandra Majumder inaugurated the countrywide “Boro Collection-2021” programme through a video conference from Dhaka yesterday morning.

High officials of the administration of nine districts -- Netrakona and Kishoreganj of Dhaka division, Naogaon and Bogura of Rajshahi division, Dinajpur of Rangpur division and Sylhet Sadar, Habiganj, Moulvibazar and Sunamganj of Sylhet division -- joined him virtually.

Officials of the food departments, mill owners and farmers’ representatives also attended the programme.

The food minister directed the officials and employees concern to be careful so that no farmers would be subject to harassment going to provide rice to the warehouses.

The minister gave instructions to the officials and staff to collect paddy and expedite food storage, maintaining health rules.

However, he also instructed not to compromise with the quality of the paddy and rice during the procurement.

In Bagerhat Sadar, Nani Gopal Hira, a farmer of Chitalmari upazila, provided 2.5 metric tonnes of paddy to the local storage of the food ministry.

“There is no food godown in Chitalmari upazila, so he had to bring his paddy to Bagerhat Sadar renting vehicle,” he said.

Food Department will collect 6.50 lakh metric tonnes of paddy directly from farmers at Tk 27 per kg.

Most of the paddy will be collected by selecting farmers through a lottery with agricultural cards given to farmers while in some districts a portion of paddy will be collected using apps, food officials said.

The ministry will also procure 10 lakh metric tonnes of parboiled rice and 1.5 lakh metric tonnes of sunburn (Atap) at Tk 40 and Tk 39 per kg from millers during the current Boro season.

The ministry could not immediately say how much paddy they would be collecting on the first day of procurement.

Govt makes it must for all

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more than 2,700 deaths every day over the last week. It is also dealing with oxygen shortages.

The government imposed a ban on entry of travellers from India via land, river and air ports. Concerned by the situation in India, the government is mulling more restrictions in Bangladesh in the future.

However, Bangladeshis in India with expired visas can return after taking a release/certificate from the Bangladesh High Commissioner in India.

They too would have to be in a 14-day quarantine. The Health Services Division, Public Safety Division, Security Services Division, shipping ministry and deputy commissioner concerned will take necessary measures in this regard. The notification did not mention where they would need to quarantine.

However, vehicles carrying goods and essentials would be allowed in.

Shops and shopping malls would remain open from 10:00am to 8:00pm ensuring health guidelines, the notification said.

Sources said the government allowed shops and malls to stay open ahead of Eid because businesses were hurting. Shops might be closed again after Eid.

Commerce ministry, labour and employment ministry, trade organisations and bazaar managing committees would take measures in this regard. Legal action would be

taken against those found violating the directives, the notification added.

The notification said the religious affairs ministry would decide on Eid congregations. The ministry has urged Muslims to offer Eid prayers at mosques instead of at Eidgahs.

Traffic movement on streets has been increasing significantly day by day.

Congestion was seen at some intersections in the capital, like Bijoy Sarani, Gulshan, Farmgate, Mirpur and also in adjacent areas of shopping centres, like New Market and Bashundhara City Mall.

Visiting some major shopping malls and markets in Dhaka -- New Market, Chandni Chawk, Gausia, Noor Mansion, Chandrima Super Market, and Bashundhara City Mall yesterday, The Daily Star correspondents found customers pouring into the shops from 10:00am.

At most shopping centres, only a few of the health safety guidelines were being followed as the rush was overwhelming.

Many shop owners and customers were seen with their masks down. Besides, there was not enough space inside most shops to maintain physical distancing.

Buses, train and launches have been out of service. Sources said the government had considered allowing buses and trains to run but changed its mind.

3-way battle amid Covid

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The TMC won 48.3 percent votes against the BJP’s 11 percent in Birbhum in the last assembly elections.

Kolkata is always a tough place for the BJP as the voters in the city, especially South Kolkata, have an exceptional bonding with TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee -- the seven time MP and two times MLA from the area.

But this time around, the BJP is trying its best to woo the voters of the city by offering many of its promises especially to the urban poor, who account for over 30 percent of the city’s population.

Over 84 lakh voters will decide the fate of 283 candidates in this this phase. The EC has deployed 641 companies of central forces to ensure free and fair voting.

Voting for the previous seven phases were held between March 27 and April 26. The vote count will take place on May 2.

Meanwhile, the EC has banned all victory processions and celebrations after the results in West Bengal as well as in Tamil Nadu, Assam, Puducherry and Kerala due to Covid-19 health restrictions.

had conveyed his country’s gratitude towards China for its support to “unity and integrity of Pakistan”.

POLITICS REVIVING IN WEST PAKISTAN

Political figures had been holding small meetings and news conferences around West Pakistan for two weeks or more, asking that the military government turn over at least some power to the people and their elected representatives.

Parties of both the right and the left in West Pakistan wanted a restoration of popular government because they had no effective power now and could only gain from a return to conventional political life.

In recent days officials of the Pakistan People’s Party and of lesser groups had been quietly seeking the support of former notables of the Awami League, which was banned when the military action began.

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Heavier inflow of refugees

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Kosygin. According to Radio Pakistan the message was in reply to one sent by Yahya. The content of the message was not disclosed. Soviet President Podgorny in a message to Yahya early this month had called for an end to the bloodbath in Bangladesh.

BE READY FOR ANY EVENTUALITY: BHUTTO

The Pakistan People’s Party Chairman Zulfikar Ali Bhutto asked the people of Pakistan to be prepared for any eventuality. He was speaking to newsmen at the Islamabad airport today following a meeting with Yahya Khan. He told questioners that he could not say whether there was any danger of war in view of India’s present attitude.

Bhutto also informed that he would soon visit East Pakistan to observe the situation there and meet local political leaders.

Earlier, Bhutto had a meeting with the Chinese ambassador in Pakistan. He told newsmen that he



A cyclo driver shares donated meals with people, after all public markets were ordered to close amid the latest outbreak of the coronavirus disease, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Should we be worried about India variant?

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horrifying since the pandemic began.

The daily cases in India began to rise at the end of February this year after a steady fall from mid-September 2020. It suddenly spiked sharply in March and reached record highs this month, setting the global record of daily infections with over 3.4 lakhs cases and staggering 2,761 deaths only on April 24.

Now the question is, what was the switch that catalysed the dramatic surge in infection? Was it the crowded election rallies that ran through February and March, followed by voting throughout April? Or was it due to public gatherings? Or is it the emergence of new variants?

Is Indian variant in play?

Viruses naturally mutate to produce different strains or variants of themselves. Most of these mutations are harmless. But others can make it more contagious, virulent, immune evader and often vaccine resistant.

India has recently detected such a variant -- officially known as B.1.617 -- in October. This variant is popularly known as a “double mutant” due to its two significant mutations on its Spike protein.

The variant was detected in 220 out of 361 Covid-19 samples collected between January and March in Maharashtra.

According to the GISAIID database, it has been spotted in at least 21 countries. In the UK, 103 cases with the Indian variant have been detected, which were carried in by international travellers since February.

Public Health England has listed it as a “variant under investigation”. Many Indian scientists believe that this variant is behind the unprecedented surge in infections that is sweeping through the entire country.

India variant has two key mutations on its Spike protein: one is L452R and other is E484Q. The L452R mutation has been found in the California variant previously.

A study published in the journal “Cell” in April 20 2021 showed that the presence of L452R mutation increases viral shedding from infected persons and increases its infection capability compared to the original version, meaning that this mutant becomes more contagious. This variant also exhibits decreased antibody neutralisation, suggesting a potential change of vaccine resistance.

The second mutation -- E484Q -- in the India variant has similarities with the one present in the South Africa and Brazil variants (E484K).

These two mutations share the same location (484) on the Spike protein; but their amino acid alterations are

dissimilar. While the South Africa and Brazil mutants’ glutamic acid is replaced by lysine, in the India variant, it is replaced by glutamine. This is why these two variants are similar but not the same.

The India variant has an additional 11 other mutations as well.

Preliminary study suggests that B.1.617 variant is more contagious than the original virus as predicted by earlier laboratory investigations. But it is important to consider that in India, the UK variant (B.1.1.7), South Africa variant and Brazil variant have also been detected.

An article published in “Nature” on April 21, 2021, shows that the UK variant has become the dominant virus in the state of Punjab, whereas the Indian B.1.617 variant has become dominant in the state of Maharashtra.

Both variants are highly contagious and immune evaders. Therefore, it is plausible that the new variants are playing a pivotal role in driving the second wave.

The current situation in India appears similar to that we have seen last year in Brazil, where sudden surge of infection devastated the city of Manaus due to the spread of the highly transmissible and immune evader variant known as P.1.

During the first wave, 1 in 5 people in India were infected by the original variant of coronavirus and fifty percent of the urban population developed antibodies in their blood, suggesting that they are somewhat protected from Covid.

However, the scale of the current nationwide infection raised a question -- why has the pre-existing immunity failed to protect a large part of population from infection?

This can be explained, at least in a part, with the fact that the immune evader variant B.1.617 could underlie the surge of second wave. A further large-scale genome sequencing is needed to confirm this speculation.

Due to the potential devastating nature of the B.1.617 variant, the UK has banned entrance of travellers from India into their country.

Have election rallies fuelled the spread?

In March, at the beginning of the second wave, India’s political parties started a series of election campaigns in West Bengal, Assam, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Each rally was crowded with thousands of people with no social distancing and a minimal use of masks.

As expected, all these states witnessed a rapid surge of infections. In West Bengal, from mid-March to mid-April, the number of daily cases jumped from one thousand cases to

12 thousand per day.

Surprisingly, within this timeframe the surge in daily cases was not unique to only these four states, rather similar infection rises were noted in other parts of India as well.

For instance, in Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka, a rapid surge of infection took place, although they were not holding any state polls.

Therefore, large gatherings during election rallies may not be the main reason for the skyrocketing trend of the second wave infection.

Lessons to be learnt from India’s crisis:

India is not alone. We have seen similar devastating second waves in Brazil, the UK, Germany and France, which were largely attributed to the new variants.

In Bangladesh, we have found the UK and South Africa variants.

We also witnessed a violent spike in infection rates during March to mid-April, which, for now, appears to be getting under control due to a nationwide “lockdown”.

But this downfall of the second wave could be a temporary event before it rises again if no effective mitigation measures are taken. To avoid a potential cataclysmic of the pandemic crisis, such as the one India is facing right now, the following measures should be considered --

(1) To stop entry of the India variant to our country, for which all access points at the border must be closed for at least two weeks. A 14-day institutional quarantine must be implemented for all incoming travellers when the ban is lifted. Similar approach should be applied for travellers from the UK, South Africa and Brazil.

(2) A large-scale variant surveillance should be conducted by genome sequencing or targeted RT-PCR. Constant monitoring of variants is paramount to trace and contain any problematic variant of concern that tends to be dominant.

(3) After easing of the nationwide strict lockdown, a long-term tier-based area-specific lockdown or mitigation measures should be in place to control transmission. People should be forced to abide by health rules.

(4) Hospital beds, ICU capacity and uninterrupted oxygen supply should be increased in every district to avoid crumbling of the healthcare system in the event of worse surge in infection rates.

(5) Vaccination efforts should be increased to cover at least 60 percent of the population by the end of 2021. Without an extensive vaccination programme, the Covid-19 pandemic cannot be overcome.

Vaccines must be distributed with equity

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agreed to closely follow the development of the pandemic in India, which recently turned severe with about 350,000 new Covid-19 cases being detected daily. They expressed willingness to provide the necessary support through respective channels in consultation with India.

Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Afghanistan acting Foreign Minister Mirwais Nab, Bangladesh Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen, Nepal Foreign Minister Pradeep Kumar Gyawali, Pakistan Foreign Minister Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi and Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena participated in Tuesday’s conference.

The conference is part of an initiative by China called “China-South Asia Platform for Covid-19 Consultation, Cooperation, and Post-pandemic Economic Recovery”.

The initiative was first taken in November last year and meetings were subsequently held at directors general and foreign secretaries levels before Tuesday foreign minister-level conference.

In the spirit of openness, inclusiveness and win-win cooperation, the six countries welcomed active participation of

other countries in the region.

At the conference, China announced its decision to establish a “China-South Asian Countries Emergency Supplies Reserve”, “China-South Asian Countries Poverty Alleviation and Cooperative Development Center” and hold a “China-South Asian Countries E-commerce Cooperation Forum on Poverty Alleviation in Rural Areas” in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

The foreign ministers said “vaccine nationalism” will hinder the global efforts to defeat Covid-19 and spoke for strengthening cooperation to track Covid-19 mutation closely. They stressed that countries should step up solidarity and cooperation to win final victory over Covid-19.

They expressed firm support for WHO’s due role in the global cooperation against Covid-19 and acknowledged that tracing the origin of the virus is a matter of science and a global mission.

China said it would work on making the vaccines a global public good, and carry out continued vaccine cooperation with the participating countries in a flexible manner, including co-production of vaccines.

The foreign ministers agreed to deepen cooperation in the Belt and

Road Initiative; open their borders, closed under the premise of pandemic prevention and control, for smooth trade; keep the industrial and supply chains stable and secure; and give a stronger boost to economic recovery.

The foreign ministers stressed upon the importance of strengthening cooperation in poverty reduction, food security, and other non-traditional security fields to protect the livelihood of people with special focus on the most vulnerable groups.

Hong Kong passes immigration bill with ‘exit ban’ powers

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong yesterday passed a new immigration law that includes powers to stop people entering or leaving the city, raising fears Chinese mainland-style “exit bans” could be deployed in the international business hub.

The legislation sailed through a legislature now devoid of opposition as Beijing seeks to quash dissent and make the semi-autonomous city more like the authoritarian mainland following huge and often violent democracy protests.

Third gender

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Nirbahi Officer (UNO) Dewan Moudud Ahmed said the government has set up Ashrayan-2 project for 50 third gender people in Dhokpandi area in the upazila.

“When the government is working to give third gender people homes, village arbitrators have no right to forcibly displace them,” he said.

The accused must be punished, the UNO added.

Apollo 11’s

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rank of Major General.

He is best known for being a member of the Apollo 11 mission when his crewmates Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first people to set foot on the Moon.

Collins would go on to say the experience forever changed his perspective, impressing upon him the fragility of our home planet.

“When we rolled out and looked at (the Moon), oh, it was an awesome sphere,” he said at a 2019 event at George Washington University commemorating the 50th anniversary.

But “as magnificent as that was, as impressive, and as much as I will remember that, that was nothing, nothing compared to this other window out there,” he continued.

“Out there was this little pea about the size of your thumbnail at arm’s length: blue, white, very shiny, you get the blue of the oceans, white of the clouds, streaks of rust we call continents, such a beautiful gorgeous tiny thing, nestled into this black velvet of the rest of the universe.”

Collins never returned to space but went on to become a diplomat, serving as assistant secretary of state for public affairs at the height of the Vietnam war.

He later became the first director of the National Air and Space Museum in Washington.

Erfan Salim walks

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officer in October last year.

There was no legal bar for Erfan to get released from jail following the apex court order, Erfan’s lawyer Sayed Ahmed Raza said after the verdict.

Erfan was arrested after a case was filed against him in connection with attacking Lt Wasif Ahmed Khan of Bangladesh Navy in the capital’s Dhanmondi area on October 25 last year.

Earlier, he had been cleared from two cases filed under Narcotics Control Act and Arms Act after investigation officers submitted final reports saying they did not find any evidence against him.

The cases were filed after Rab raided Erfan’s Chawkbazar house on October 26 last year, a day after his arrest. Rab claimed to have seized five bottles of foreign liquor and an unlicensed pistol with two bullets.

But Chawkbazar police, which later investigated the cases, submitted final reports in the cases on January 5.

During the Rab drive, Erfan was sentenced by a mobile court of Executive Magistrate Sarwoer Alam to six months’ jail in connection with the recovery of illegal alcohol and another six months for possessing illegal walkie-talkies.

In those cases, Salim secured bail from Additional District Magistrate Court on January 4.

India’s virus toll

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B.1.617 variant had as of Tuesday been detected in over 1,200 sequences uploaded to the GISAIID open-access database “from at least 17 countries”.

Offering a glimmer hope, the co-founder of BioNTech -- which developed a Covid-19 vaccine with Pfizer -- said he is confident the shot works against the variant.

“We are still testing the Indian variant, but the Indian variant has mutations that we have already tested for and which our vaccine works against, so I am confident,” said Ugur Sahin.

White House Chief Medical Adviser Anthony Fauci said on Tuesday Covaxin, India’s home-grown Covid vaccine produced by Bharat Biotech, has been found to neutralise the B.1.617 variant.

SEARCH FOR VACCINES

Experts said India’s best hope to fight the pandemic was to vaccinate its vast population and yesterday it opened registrations for everyone above the age of 18 to be given jabs.

But the country, which is one of the world’s biggest producers of vaccines, does not yet have the stocks for an estimated 600 million people becoming eligible, on top of ongoing effort to inoculate the elderly and people with other medical conditions.

People who tried to register said they failed.

“Tried registering and blocking a slot for vaccination,” said Shourya Agarwal on Twitter. Failed multiple times.”

Even those already eligible were struggling to find doses, reports Reuters.

“They are telling us that injections are not available, as vaccines have not arrived,” said Mumbai resident Pushpa Goswami at a vaccination centre. She said she registered three days ago.