

BANGLADESH UPDATE

1,359
New cases in 24hrs

7,61,943
Total cases

11,569
Deaths

6,87,328
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

3,213,308
Deaths

153,385,138
Total cases

PRESS FREEDOM DAY

200 violations of press freedom in Asia-Pacific

Half of them in South Asia, says IPI

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Over 200 press freedom violations linked to the pandemic were reported in the Asia-Pacific region, of which about half were from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Nepal, stated a press release by International Press Institute (IPI). "Seventy-one journalists faced arrests and charges for their coverage of the pandemic and its consequences in those countries, while 32 cases of physical attacks and verbal threats were reported," said the statement.

So far, IPI has recorded 635 press freedom violations around the world related to Covid-19, it added.

"The Covid-19 pandemic has delivered a debilitating blow to press freedom across the globe. Governments have tried to stifle independent media, while an alarming number of journalists have come under attacks for their coverage of the health crisis," said the statement.

This trend has been observed to be perpetrated by "authoritarian and illiberal-minded" regimes, it added.

Myanmar's military junta has arrested more than 70 journalists, revoked licences of independent media outlets and repeatedly blocked internet access, it said.

Meanwhile, India's increasingly illiberal government, stung by widespread criticism in the media over its response to the pandemic and the large-scale farmers' protest, has stepped up legal harassment of journalists, notably through its notorious sedition law, said IPI.

"Journalists in Indian-administered Kashmir continue to face an agonising clampdown aimed at controlling news related to the territory."

The coronavirus pandemic has aided the negative trend as governments use the public health crisis to restrict reporting, said IPI. Authorities have blocked access to information, arrested journalists for their coverage of the virus, and passed sweeping "fake news" laws that can be used to silence criticism, it added.

Africa ranks second in terms of arrests and charges against journalists and media outlets. Zimbabwe reported the greatest number of arrests in the region, it said.

"Numerous states have imposed restrictions on access to information, preventing journalists from speaking to health officials or medical workers, or blocking independent media from attending press conferences," said the statement.



A man hard at work on block printing clothes near the capital's New Market. Shoppers visit the stores to get their designs customised by the workers. The price of a block print dress depends on the design and can range from Tk 100 to Tk 500. The photo was taken on Saturday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

69 more die of Covid, positivity rate drops

UNB, Dhaka

As the deadly coronavirus continues its onslaught in Bangladesh, health authorities reported 69 more deaths in 24 hours until 8:00am yesterday.

With this, the total number of people who died of the virus was 11,569.

Besides, 1,359 new cases were detected after examining 14,158 samples during those 24 hours.

However, the positivity rate fell to 9.60 percent from Saturday's 9.61 percent while the fatality rate rose to 1.52 percent from 1.51 percent of the previous day.

Bangladesh reported its first coronavirus cases on March 8 last year and the first death on the 18th of that month.

During this second wave, the country reported its highest single-day deaths on April 19 this year, which was 112.

It reported the highest single-day new cases on April 7, which was 7,626.

Of blitz & brash in Bengal

FROM PAGE 1

sides taking a break from spewing venom on each other.

The two sides – the incumbent Trinamool Congress and the 'outsider' BJP, though they would not club themselves as Hum Dono – have never been frugal in spitting toxins through the last several months. Each one has been baying for the blood of a friend, who's turned his coat, and became a foe. They clocked thousands of airmiles in these months only to warn and threaten their rivals. And, in the process, they dangled endless carrots to voters, the ostensible deciders of fate for these political leaders. It's easy to lure in votes by strewing promises before a starving populace a quarter of which still survives with a per-capita income of Rs 360 (\$4.86) a month.

The high-octane polls in a land riddled with severe funds crunch have seen over Rs 100 crore being splurged on air travel for political chieftains whom we select to seal our fates. The rulers or the ruler-aspirants are draped in green or saffron or white, and they're at ease to change their shades, well, almost anytime. But the ruled remained in the red since the days of the Red and through the sweeping Green and the intimidating Saffron.

Facebook alone cornered Rs 3.74 crore from the political rivals on the battleground Bengal. Social media became the virtual rehearsal room for incessant campaigns and counter-campaigns, amplifying the development clunk of the politicians. The state was abuzz with the deafening slogans of a golden sunshine, eclipsing the second Lilliputian invasion of a microbe on an army of 133 crore Giants.

The toxins that some of the leaders of the world's largest democracy threw up over the last few months of campaign for the Bengal corner room would not choke you to death like coronavirus but sting you to sulk and seethe. Instead of prodding people not to breach the guidelines set for the pandemic, they indulged you to step out and crowd up in their show

of might. At the end of every rally, you returned home with the looming fear of being counted among the over four lakhs being infected by the virus every day in this country.

We watched blithely through these months as the leaders belted out all sorts of expletives that rarely a political dais has staged. We saw how they went from professional attack to personal onslaughts. We witnessed both sides making vulgar gyrations, saying abusive skits, and displaying a pathetic absence of basic minimum respect that a human being deserves. Let's not talk about the rampant clashes that marred the eight-phase election process and claimed several lives.

What did we fight for? The question keeps coming back to my mind. Is it for safeguarding my religious identity or is it for securing my economic future? It serves none, to be precise. Religion takes a backseat when finances are on the blaze. In a state that has seen industries melting down across regimes, nothing is dearer than a life of peace and security.

The triumph of Mamata Banerjee is commendable in the backdrop of defection by some of her trusted lieutenants. The drubbing of the fundamentalist forces could be comforting in a state that has rarely seen religious riots in the last several decades. But what about the future of an individual, of whatever religious belonging and of economic background?

Escape. That's the answer. Bengal cannot beckon its brains unless it cedes its tradition of political euphoria and focus on itself more constructively, instead of letting these leaders use its land for belching out the negatives they harbour.

Mohammad Rafi keeps crooning, Barbadiyon ka jasn mana ta chala gaya...

Har fikr ko dhuyen mein udata chala gaya...

The author is a journalist and writer based in Kolkata, India. The views expressed are personal.

Can we administer different vaccine for 2nd dose?

FROM PAGE 1

at the shot. Some 22 thousand adult volunteers in Russia took part in the trial phase, which continued from September to November last year.

No severe side effects were observed in the vaccine trial. A few deaths were reported during trial, but later was cleared as unrelated to the vaccine. The effectiveness of the vaccine on adults (18-60 year) was quite similar to the elderly.

However, only the frozen formulation of this vaccine has been tested during the Phase-3 trial. The storing temperature for the frozen vaccine is -18 degree Celsius. Another formulation of this vaccine is its powder or lyophilized form, which can be stored at 4-8 degree Celsius in a regular refrigerator.

This formulation has not yet been evaluated in the Phase-3 trial.

According to the phase one and two trial reports, published in the Lancet on September 8, 2020, both formulations were able to produce enough neutralising antibodies in the blood of all participants and it also elicited the desired "T-cell response".

The finding allows us to expect the similar effectiveness of the frozen form from the powder form of the vaccine. However, there must be adequate evidence in this regard. We should take this fact in consideration before choosing which formulation of Sputnik-V could be manufactured in Bangladesh.

This vaccine, which has been developed by the century old Gamalaya institute of Russia, is a heterogeneous adenovirus vector vaccine. Two different types of human adenovirus have been used for the two doses of this vaccine. A rare adenovirus species named Ad26 has been used for the first dose and a common species Ad5 adenovirus has been used for the second dose.

Using DNA recombinant technology, a piece of coronavirus gene has been inserted inside the adenovirus vectors which are capable of producing Spike protein. These recombinant adenoviruses are injected into the muscle as shots, which produce the spike protein to elicit an immune response against the coronavirus and eventually, builds the protective immunity.

The other vaccines developed using adenovirus vector technology include Oxford-AstraZeneca, Johnson & Johnson and China's Cansinobio

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Bittersweet win for Mamata

FROM PAGE 1

The two parties formed an alliance after being adversaries for over 70 years. But the friendliness among the top leaders never trickled down to the grassroots.

In the last assembly polls in 2016, TMC got 211 seats, CPIM and Congress got 76 seats and BJP got only three. This year they are heading for just one.

As of filing this report at 12:00am, TMC is poised to win 210 seats and the BJP 80 seats out of a total 296 seats. Elections were postponed in two seats after the death of their candidates. The magic figure to form the government is 148 seats.

In the last assembly polls in 2016, TMC got 211 seats, CPIM and Congress got 76 seats and BJP got only three. TMC got 44.91 percent votes, the left and Congress won 32 percent votes while BJP achieved only 10 percent.

The scenario changed in the last Lok Sabha elections (National Polls) in 2019, when TMC got 43.69 percent votes and BJP managed to bag 40.64, leading it to take the WB assembly seriously enough to solidify its footprints on the West Bengal map.

As soon as TMC managed to score a majority in the West Bengal assembly, all eyes turned to the high-stakes Nandigram seat, the town that catapulted Mamata to power in 2011 for the first time, where she was pitted against her aide-turned-rival Suwendu Adhikari, who joined the BJP early this year.

After going back and forth for an entire evening, the Election Commission declared Adhikari the winner by a narrow margin from the constituency. Mamata and Suwendu alternately led in different rounds of vote counts and recounts.

Mamata now effectively has six

months to get another shot at being elected as the Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). For this, an MLA from her party will have to resign so that by-polls can be held there.

Immediately after her party's landslide victory, Mamata said, "This is a victory for the people of Bengal. I am proud to say that Bengal saved the country. The Election Commission behaved badly with us -- they behaved like BJP's spokesperson. BJP played dirty politics and lost the election."

She also announced her decision to move court over "mischievous" in Nandigram counting.

Addressing her first media conference in Kolkata on her feet after leaving the wheelchair, she said the first priority of her new government would be to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi last night congratulated Mamata and promised continued support to her government to "fulfil the people's aspirations and to overcome Covid-19 pandemic."

Confined to a wheelchair with her leg in a cast during most of the campaign after being attacked in Nandigram, Mamata has clearly come out as the undisputed winner in Bengal.

Riding on a blend of welfare schemes, promised doles and Bengali sub-nationalism and the catchy jingle of "khela hobey", Mamata spearheaded her Trinamool Congress to a hat-trick, galloping back to power in West Bengal for the third consecutive time with a comfortable majority.

However, the BJP made history in Assam by coming back to power in the state to become the first non-Congress party to do so. The party is also set to have a share of the power pie in the tiny

state of Puducherry as a junior partner of regional party All India NR Congress party.

While the Left Front coalition was all set to return to power in Kerala, breaking a four decade-old trend in the state, regional outfit Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam is poised to sweep back to power in the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

The biggest loser of this round of elections in the five states was the Congress which was defeated comprehensively in Assam, Kerala and Puducherry, where it had held power before these elections, while in Bengal it is on the verge of extinction from the electoral scene.

The biggest and most watched election was, of course, that in West Bengal -- considered by the BJP as the "final frontier" in its unending quest for expanding its footprints in all the states. BJP's performance in Bengal exposed its failure to produce a credible chief ministerial candidate who could match Mamata's charisma.

Mamata has clearly come out as the undisputed winner in Bengal where the BJP made it a personal battle with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The abiding image of the campaign was Mamata, clad in a white blue-bordered saree and hawai chappal, being pushed in a wheelchair and addressing 90 public meetings across Bengal.

But what overshadowed everything else is Mamata making Bengali sub-nationalism the central electoral plank. It was to drive this theme that she successfully stirred the "outsider (bohiringoto) versus insider" debate and played the "Joy Bangla" slogan to counter BJP's "Jai Shri Ram" chant.

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