

BANGLADESH UPDATE



1,914
New cases in 24hrs



7,65,596
Total cases



11,705
Deaths



6,95,032
Recoveries



3,231,590
Deaths



154,548,008
Total cases

MAYHEM OVER MODI'S VISIT

Hefajat demands release of detained leaders, activists

Places 4-point demand before home boss; 3 more leaders of the outfit arrested

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Hefajat-e-Islam last night demanded release of "Ulema and religious-minded general people" who were arrested over violence by the Islamist organisation in March during demonstrations protesting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh.

A 10-member Hefajat delegation, led by Secretary General of its convening committee Nurul Islam Jihadi, put four-point demand to Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan during a meeting with him at his city residence.

Describing the minister as a guardian of Ulema, mosques, and madrasas, the Hefajat leaders also demanded stopping the "ongoing harassment of religious-minded general people" across the country.

Their other demands include withdrawal of cases filed in connection with the Hefajat mayhem at the capital's Shapla Chattar in 2013 as per an earlier decision.

Under pressure from the government due to an ongoing crackdown on Hefajat high-ups, leaders of the Qwami madrasa based organisation called on the home minister to reach a consensus on release of its arrested leaders, sources said.

The meeting started around 9:20pm and continued for more than two and a half hours.

Under pressure from the government, Hefajat Amir Junayed Babunagari was forced to dissolve its central committee on April 26. He named a five-member convening committee, headed by him.

State Minister for religious affairs Faridul haque Khan, ruling Awami League MP RAM Obaidul Muktadir Chowdhury from Brahmanbaria-3, among others were also present at the meeting last night.

Speaking to journalists after the meeting, Hefajat leader Nurul Islam Jihadi said the home minister assured them of considering their demands.

Hefajat insiders said leaders of the organisation at the meeting tried to convince the government side of their non-involvement in the violence from March 26 to 28.

The government side responded saying that Hefajat leaders who were involved in recent violent activities must be brought to book.

Hefajat leaders also said they wanted

to end the "misunderstanding" between the government and their organisation centring the demonstrations against Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh.

The Islamist outfit on March 26-28 had carried out mayhem in different parts of the country, particularly in Brahmanbaria, during the protests.

So far, 142 cases have been filed and around 21 top leaders of Hefajat and 890 people, mostly supporters of the organisation, have been arrested in connection with the violence. Among the arrestees is Hefajat leader Mamunul Haque.

3 MORE HEFAJAT MEN HELD
Meanwhile, police yesterday arrested three more Hefajat leaders in connection with the violence during the anti-Modi protests in Chattogram and Brahmanbaria in March.

In Chattogram, police arrested Mowlana Mohammad Arif, science and technology affairs secretary of Hathazari municipality Hefajat unit; and Mowlana Mohammad Tajul Islam, assistant dawah affairs secretary of Hefajat Hathazari upazila unit, reports our Chattogram correspondent.

Rafiqul Islam, officer-in-charge of Hathazari Police Station, said the arrestees' involvement in recent Hefajat mayhem at Hathazari municipality was found during the investigation of the cases filed in this connection.

They were shown arrested in two cases filed with the police station after the March 26 violence, he said.

Four people, including three madrasa students, were killed during the violence in the area.

In Brahmanbaria, police arrested Mufti Abdur Rahim Quasemi, the joint general secretary of Hefajat district committee, yesterday.

Quasemi was arrested from Bhadughar in Brahmanbaria municipality area around 4:00pm, reports our Brahmanbaria correspondent.

The Hefajat leader had earlier resigned demanding the authorities bring those involved in the March 26 and 28 violence in the district to book.

In another development, Hefajat's former joint secretary general Mamunul Haque and its Dhaka city unit's former president Junayed Al Habib were placed on different terms of remand yesterday in five cases filed with Paltan Police Station over the 2013 mayhem and the recent violence in Dhaka.



Staffers of Dhaka Medical College Hospital bring old beddings out of the Corona unit of the hospital yesterday for dumping. The beddings would be replaced with new ones.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Hardly cared for in hard times

FROM PAGE 1

This is not only the case for hawkers but also for workers in transportation, construction, hotels and restaurants, and other arenas of the urban informal sector who are suffering the dire consequences of no social or legal protection and job benefits.

Hunger is now a regular feature of their lives, said leaders of various workers' unions in the informal sector. While some will receive the cash support the government is providing to the poorest, experts say the amount is too little and the number of recipients too few to have an impact on the large informal sector.

Murshikul said a good number of hawkers took out microcredit loans at a high interest rate of around 25 percent from non-government organisations to do business ahead of the upcoming Eid.

"Hawkers usually enjoy a good earning during Eid every year. We had missed the business of last year's Eid when the government imposed a lockdown, which destroyed all our savings," he said.

There are around 10 lakh hawkers in the country, who are now unable to provide for their family's basic needs, Murshikul said.

The government has so far announced 23 stimulus packages involving Tk 1,24,053 crore, more than four percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). But the majority of these schemes were created to free the formal sector.

There are 6.08 crore employed labourers in the country, 85.1 percent of whom work in the informal sector, according to the Labour Force Survey 2016-17 carried out by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). Though the sector contributes around 50 percent of the economy, its workers are left out of government support schemes.

A major reason for this is there is no government database of informal workers or recent official figures on how many such workers are there across the country.

KM Abdus Salam, secretary of the Ministry of Labour and Employment, said the government is now operating relief programmes under district commissioner (DC) offices.

It is slightly tough to identify workers in the informal sector as there is no database on them, he added.

Razequzzaman Ratan, president of the Socialist Labour Front, said according to their estimates, at least 60 percent of informal sector workers have lost their jobs due to the pandemic and ongoing economic situation.

Although there is no government survey on how many people lost their jobs due to the economic shock caused by the coronavirus pandemic, Rizwanul Islam, a former special adviser to the employment sector of the International Labour Organisation, estimated that around 1.35 crore workers in the informal sector lost their jobs during last year's shutdown.

Published in the form of a book titled "Shocks of Coronavirus on the Economy and Labour Market" in March this year, Rizwanul, also a

former teacher of Dhaka University's economics department, calculated this based on data from the Labour Force Survey 2016-17.

WORKERS' WOES
Aktarujjaman Khan, president of the Bangladesh Hotel Restaurant Sweetmeat Bakery Workers Union, said no workers of the union have so far got any support from the government since the start of the pandemic.

Around 30 lakh workers are involved in the sector. Of them, more than 96 percent are now unemployed, he said.

Almost all hotels and restaurants were closed across the country during last year's shutdown and the current situation is once again the same after the government declared restrictions on movement since April 5.

"We have so far submitted four statements to the prime minister and the state minister for labour in the last year. But the government has not paid heed to address our woes," Aktarujjaman said.

At least 40 percent workers -- 12 lakh -- who were rendered unemployed failed to get back their jobs between June last year and this March, even after the government relaxed the shutdown, as restaurant owners kept a reduced number of staffers at their establishments, Aktarujjaman said.

The union demanded the government provide Tk 10,000 per month as an incentive to every unemployed worker.

Employed workers have also now lost their jobs in the wake of the recent restrictions, he said, as only very few restaurants are now open to sell iftar items.

Md Abdur Rajjak, general secretary of the Imarat Nirman Sramik Union Bangladesh, said his organisation had lost interest in demanding support from the government for construction workers.

Earlier, they placed their demands to the government a number of times, but no response has so far been forthcoming, he said.

He, however, said a few construction workers managed to get relief support from several DC offices last year.

At least 40 percent of construction workers -- 16 lakh -- have become unemployed due to the ongoing restrictions on movement, he said.

"The workers are now in a critical condition as they do not have any income sources except their labour. But this way is now largely closed," Rajjak said.

At a Road Transport Workers Federation press conference at the National Press Club on April 30, General Secretary Osman Ali said around 50 lakh transport workers became jobless and their livelihoods uncertain ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr.

"They are leading a miserable life along with their family members," he said.

Some organisations involved in the transport sector recently demanded the government provide financial assistance and introduce rations for workers, urging the government to sell rice at Tk 10 per kg at the bus terminals to workers.

The federation also demanded

public transport services be resumed immediately, which remain officially suspended due to the Covid-19 restrictions till at least today.

CASH SUPPORT TOO LITTLE

Like last year, the government is providing another round of Tk 2,500 cash assistance through mobile financial service providers to the same families which received assistance last year.

Around 34.97 lakh families got Tk 2,500 each under a Tk 1,258-crore stimulus package last year.

The target beneficiaries included rickshaw-pullers, day labourers, construction workers, farmers, shop employees, people working at small businesses, and transport workers.

However, the cash support provided by the government is not adequate, said Nazneen Ahmed, a senior research fellow of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, adding that no lockdown can be effective if the government does not provide adequate support to the poor.

A four-member household requires at least Tk 6,000 per month to live in an urban area as per the Household Income and Expenditure Survey carried out by BBS in 2016, she said.

"But the capacity of the government to provide such financial assistance is weak. So, workers of the informal sector should be allowed to join their work by relaxing the restrictions."

However, the government has not taken sufficiently strict measures to ensure people are following health protocols, Nazneen added.

Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, also said, "Both the amount and the number of beneficiaries are too small given the size of the informal sector."

Although the country's economy is greatly dependent on the informal sector, the workers are neglected in terms of getting assistance from the government, he said.

Informal sector workers in general face various troubles in doing their jobs as they lack legal protection from their employers and the Covid-19 situation has worsened their situation as many of them have lost their jobs outright, Khondaker said.

The authorities concerned should take a plan to provide cash support at least thrice this year as the initiative will help improve their purchasing power, which will have a positive impact on the overall economy, he said.

The amount of cash support for the informal sector is significantly lower than the funds the formal sector has received in the form of stimulus packages from the government.

The government should also create a database of the workers in the informal sector with the help of the different labour unions, which will also allow them to reach out to the proper people to provide the cash support, Khondaker added.

Asked whether the labour ministry had taken any initiative to create a database, Secretary KM Abdus Salam said that they have taken a move to this end.

Bangladeshi shot dead inside Indian territory

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

A Bangladeshi was shot dead allegedly by a group of villagers inside Indian territory near Kendribil in Sylhet's Jaintapur upazila yesterday morning.

The victim, Makbul Hossain, 25, was the son of Jamshed Ali of Kendri village in the upazila.

The incident happened when four Bangladeshis, including Makbul, crossed the Indian border allegedly to smuggle something in the morning, said Lt Col Ahmed Yusuf Jamil, commanding officer of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) Battalion-48 in Sylhet.

"Seeing them, indigenous Khasi villagers opened fire on the four Bangladeshis, leaving Makbul dead on the spot," he said, adding that the other fellow Bangladeshis brought the body inside Bangladesh territory and then fled the place.

Golam Dastagir, officer-in-charge of Jaintapur Police Station, said, "On information, we recovered the body from the border and sent it to Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital for an autopsy."

"A group of villagers often go inside Indian territory to smuggle things like betel nut and logs of wood," he said.

Quoting locals, the OC added that Khasi people opened fire on four Bangladeshis as they had an altercation with them after they entered India.

BGB-48 Battalion's commanding officer also said, "We are vigilant at the border and continue awareness campaign among locals. But it is not improving the situation as local union parishad representatives are not cooperating."

"We urge all people not to risk their life by entering India," he said.

Khaleda Zia

FROM PAGE 1

of oxygen support. But it went up to 99 percent after the support was restored... It [the saturation level] is fluctuating," said one of the sources.

Khaleda's blood sugar level fluctuated between 14 and 18 millimoles per litre after she was injected with Remdesivir used for treating Covid-19 patients. Despite all these, her mental condition was good.

Her family members are trying to take her to the UK or Singapore or Thailand for better treatment but there are some legal bars in this regard, the source mentioned.

On behalf of her family, the party contacted the government high-ups about her treatment abroad but they maintained that such a decision has to come from the court since it involves legal issues, it added.

Earlier yesterday, the 10-member medical board, formed to oversee Khaleda's treatment, assessed her physical condition.

Khaleda's personal physician AZM Zahid Hossain, also a member of the board, said they examined her and saw some improvements.

"Some new medicines were administered to her," he told reporters last night without giving details.

Khaleda was admitted to Evercare Hospital on April 27 night for diagnosis after testing positive for Covid for the second time on April 24. She first tested Covid positive on April 11.

On Monday afternoon, she was shifted to the coronary care unit at the hospital with breathing difficulties.

She has also been suffering from arthritis, diabetes and eye problems.

BRIEFINGS
Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal said no request was made to the government for taking Khaleda abroad for treatment.

"We have not received any application from Khaleda Zia's family..."

he told journalists after distributing Eid gifts on behalf of the prime minister among unemployed people in the city's East Rajabazar area.

The minister also mentioned that the government already extended suspension of Khaleda's sentences for another six months.

Meanwhile, Attorney General AM Amin Uddin said it is up to the government to decide whether Khaleda will be sent abroad for treatment.

"I think court's permission is needed in this regard as the government suspended her jail sentences under Section-401 (of the code of criminal procedure). I cannot say specifically about it without seeing the relevant documents and laws," he told reporters on the Supreme Court premises.

Amid the Covid-19 outbreak, the government on March 25 last year freed Khaleda for six months through an executive order suspending her jail sentences in two corruption cases.

She was released from the prison cell at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University the same day. Since then, she had been staying at her Gulshan residence.

The government on August 27 last year extended the suspension of her sentences for six months. It was extended for another six months on March 15 this year.

On February 8, 2018, the BNP chief landed in Old Dhaka Central Jail after a court sentenced her to five years' imprisonment in the Zia Orphanage Trust corruption case. The High Court later doubled her sentence.

Khaleda was also found guilty in another graft case the same year. Her party, however, claims both the cases are politically motivated.

Dhaka, Moscow

FROM PAGE 1

they cannot send vaccines on time."

The minister however said they were expecting to get the Sputnik V vaccine at a reasonable price.

Sputnik V has been priced at about \$10 per shot in other countries, according to media reports.

"Many countries are using this vaccine. So, it won't be a problem for us to know the price of the vaccine from other countries. We hope the price will be reasonable," said the health minister.

He said after the initial agreement, the Bangladesh embassy in Russia will further negotiate other issues including the price before the final agreement.

"We are trying to sign the agreement at the soonest," the health minister said.

The government also approved in principle the local coproduction of Russia's Sputnik V involving Bangladeshi drug makers.

On April 27, the government authorised the emergency use of Sputnik V in the country.

Bangladesh's mass inoculation programme suffered serious setbacks after the Indian government restricted the export of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine produced by the Serum Institute of India.

Due to vaccine shortage, the

government suspended administering the first doses from April 26.

However, the emergency use authorisation of Sputnik V means there is no bar to importing and administering that vaccine. Health officials said they can resume the first dose of vaccination once they the Russian vaccine arrives.

Maj Gen Mahbubur Rahman, director general of Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA), told The Daily Star on April 27 that Russia will give Bangladesh 40 lakh doses in May and June. He also said Sputnik V will be administered as the first dose.

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

The Russian vaccine has been registered in around 60 countries and is currently in use in some of those countries.

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 jabs amid an intensifying second wave of the deadly virus.

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

Beds vacant as positivity rate drops

FROM PAGE 1

The highest 7,626 new cases were recorded on April 7, while the highest 112 deaths were reported on April 19.

The daily positivity rate kept on declining since April 16, thanks to the "movement restrictions" imposed on April 5.

In the previous two months, the daily positivity rate remained below five percent.

61 MORE DIE

Yesterday, the positivity rate was 8.71 percent against 21,984 tests, according to a DGHS press release.

A total of 1,914 new infections were recorded in 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday, taking the total number of

infected people to 765,596.

Sixty-one more people died from Covid-19 during the same 24-hour period. With this, the total number of deaths reached 11,705. The death rate now stands at 1.53 percent.

As many as 3,870 coronavirus patients recovered during the 24-hour period. The total number of recoveries reached 6,95,032 and the recovery rate is 90.78 percent.

Among the 61 deceased, 36 were men and 25 women. One of them was aged between 11 and 20, three were between 31 and 40, two between 41 and 50, 11 between 51 and 60 and 44 were aged above 60.

A breath of fresh air in Covid crisis

FROM PAGE 1

Taufiq Hasan, the supervisor of the project and a co-inventor, told The Daily Star.

They took the initiative taking into consideration the high demand of oxygen in the country amid the Covid-19 crisis.

He said it is better to use a medical oxygen supply in a hospital to have high oxygen concentration but in case of emergency, Oxyjet CPAP can be used, although it will not last long.

In the general wards, most hospitals of Bangladesh have the mechanism to provide oxygen to patients up to 15 litres per minute.

When a critically-ill Covid-19 patient requires more oxygen, they are usually administered the HFNO treatment. However, continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) is also one of the key methods that can be used to treat such patients.

Depending on the patient's need, Oxyjet CPAP can provide up to 60 litres/min of 100 percent oxygen in the general wards before ICU admission.

Non-invasive respiratory support strategies, such as CPAP or HFNO, are attractive treatment options that might avoid the need for invasive mechanical ventilation and its inherent risks, according to the acclaimed medical

journal, the Lancet.

HFNO is delivered by an air/oxygen blender, an active humidifier, a single heated circuit, and a nasal cannula. Though effective in treating severe Covid-19 patients, it is too expensive for public hospitals.

On the other hand, Oxyjet CPAP requires a standard CPAP mask with accessories and a connection to an oxygen source without any electricity.

"We hope that our device can be a low-cost alternative to HFNO, especially for patients treated at the suspected or confirmed Covid-19 wards, and reduce ICU admissions," said Dr Taufiq.

"When we are faced with peak COVID-19 spread, it is not possible to accumulate an adequate number of high-flow nasal cannula devices in the country. Due to the lack of expert operators, these devices cannot be efficiently utilised," he said.

With the approval of Bangladesh Medical Research Council, Oxyjet CPAP has already passed the first and second stages of the clinical trial and got the permission for the third stage of a randomised controlled trial. In the third phase, the safety and efficacy of the device will be compared against HFNO.

The third phase trial is currently going on in Dhaka Medical College Hospital. "If the trial is successful, with the

approval of the authorities concerned and the advice of physicians, this device can be used as a low-cost alternative to high-flow nasal cannula," Dr Taufiq said.

The Oxyjet CPAP project is being funded by Ankur International Foundation; Innovation and Entrepreneurship Development Academy Establishment under the ICT Division of the government, and Manusher Jonno Foundation.

Dr Forhad Uddin Hasan Chowdhury, medicine and infectious diseases specialist at Dhaka Medical College Hospital, said, "In the phase three trial, a total of 20 patients will be administered oxygen with high-flow nasal cannula while 20 others with Oxyjet CPAP."

"We have so far enrolled about 14 patients and now collecting data. We hope to get the results within two months."

Dr Forhad, who is involved in the study, said Oxyjet CPAP was used for the patients who required more than 15 litres of oxygen per minute. It can be handled by any physician after only one hour of training while the use of HFNO devices is more complex.

The other benefit of this ventilator is that it is cost effective as it takes around Tk 25,000 to make the device. The cost will go down once the commercial production begins, he said.