

BANGLADESH UPDATE



1,742
New cases in 24hrs



7,67,338
Total cases



11,755
Deaths



6,98,465
Recoveries



3,250,140
Deaths



155,644,529
Total cases

FBCCI's office building had no design approval

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The country's apex trade body FBCCI has constructed a multi-storey building in Old Dhaka's Hatkhola without an approved design and that's why it could not use the high-rise for a long time.

"The Hatkhola building remains empty for three years. Because the design of the building was not approved. We recently had the design approved," said FBCCI President Sheikh Fazle Fahim.

He was addressing a virtual programme marking the inauguration of the trade body's new logo and renovated federation building, FBCCI Icon, in Motijheel.

Fahim said the ownership of the Motijheel building is not yet in the name of Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI). The process is underway to take over the ownership and it is expected to be completed soon, he added.

According to the trade organisation, former finance minister AMA Muhiuh had laid the foundation stone of the 13-storey FBCCI building on 14.43 katha land in Hatkhola on May 7, 2012. The construction cost of the building with a three-storey basement was Tk 36 crore. The National Development Engineering Limited (NDE) built the building.

Yesterday, Salman F Rahman, private industry and investment adviser to the prime minister, virtually inaugurated the FBCCI Icon building. Former presidents of the organisation Mahbubur Rahman, Mir Nasir Hossain, AK Azad, Abdul Matlub Ahmad and Shafiqul Islam Mohiuddin joined the programme.

Speaking at the event, Mohiuddin said, "Being in power, there is a tendency to ignore the law. Constructing the building without having its design approved is negligence on our part."

He said they lost the BCMEA building in Hatijheel even after buying a piece of land for Tk 4.15 crore. "While

registering the land after buying it from Export Promotion Bureau, it was found that they were not the owners. The original owner Bangladesh Railway did not give the ownership of the land to EPB."

AK Azad said there are two main problems of FBCCI -- it has no income and businessmen cannot sit in a place to hold meetings. He observed that they should have a big piece of land allotted in Purbachal.

Salman said, "We are harming ourselves with our whims. We build a building without an approved design."

He said the size of the country's economy is growing and the FBCCI is also getting bigger. And that's why it needs structural reforms.

Fahim said the lobby, meeting room and auditorium of the FBCCI Icon building have been named after the former presidents of the organisation.

He said the FBCCI will have some profit and non-profit organisations.

Clearance for setting up a university has already been received. The FBCCI board in a meeting last month approved setting up a number of institutions, including bank, insurance company, hospital and medical college. These institutions will be run under a foundation which will be led by former leaders of the trade body, Fahim added.

The FBCCI chief said he was not in favor of bringing money from the government for the development of the organisation. "If necessary, we will give money to the government."

Admitting the construction of the FBCCI building without an approved design, its former president Abdul Matlub Ahmad told The Daily Star that there was no need to do anything without following rules and laws. This might harm the office bearers of the trade body, he said.

"Everybody wanted to say to follow the rules and regulations to avoid unnecessary hassles," he said.



All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) party leader Mamata Banerjee takes formal oath as Chief Minister of West Bengal state at the Raj Bhavan in Kolkata yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Mamata sworn in

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the "Throne" room of the British colonial-era building Raj Bhavan, with Covid-19 protocols in place.

Apart from senior TMC leaders like its Secretary General Partha Chatterjee and Subrata Mukherjee, Mamata's poll strategist Prashant Kishor and her lawmaker-nephew Abhishek Banerjee were present at the swearing-in ceremony.

Leaders of opposition parties including BJP state President Dilip Ghosh, state Congress chief Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury and the Left and the Congress did not attend the ceremony.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi took to Twitter to congratulate Mamata on her oath-taking as Chief Minister. Mamata took the oath in Bangla to become the 21st Chief Minister of WB.

Mamata alone took oath yesterday and her cabinet will be expanded with the induction of other ministers on May 9, the birth anniversary of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, TMC sources said.

Referring to the post-election results violence, Mamata told journalists at the Raj Bhavan, "I will tackle law and order from today and deal with these sternly. This is my second priority."

India's Covid

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1% of the country's population was fully vaccinated.

"What is happening in India right now is a horrifying preview of Nepal's future if we cannot contain this latest Covid surge that is claiming more lives by the minute," said Netra Prasad Timsina, chair of the Nepal Red Cross.

"It is beyond distressing to see that people cannot say goodbye to their loved ones as cremations are taking place at record levels due to these new Covid variants, which are striking down people of all ages in Nepal."

India accounted for nearly half the cases reported worldwide last week, the World Health Organization said yesterday, as Covid-19 deaths in the south Asian nation rose by a record 3,780 during the past 24 hours.

In a weekly report, the WHO said India accounted for 46% of global cases and a quarter of global deaths reported in the past week.

Daily infections rose by 382,315 yesterday, health ministry data showed. The number has been in excess of 300,000 every day for the past two weeks.

Hospitals are scrambling for beds and oxygen as they desperately battle a second deadly surge in infections, while morgues and crematoriums struggle to deal with a seemingly unstoppable flow of bodies.

Many people have died in ambulances and car parks waiting for a bed or oxygen.

In a scathing take-down, the Allahabad High Court has observed that the death of Covid-19 patients just for non-supply of oxygen to hospitals is a criminal act "not less than a genocide" by authorities entrusted with the task of ensuring that the oxygen supply chain is maintained.

A top scientific advisor to the government said a third wave was "inevitable" and the authorities should be prepared for it, reports our New Delhi correspondent.

"A phase three is inevitable given the higher levels of circulating virus but it is not clear on what time scale this phase three will occur. We should prepare for new waves," K Vijay Raghavan, Principal Scientific Advisor to the Indian government, Centre told the media in New Delhi yesterday.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has been widely criticised for not acting sooner to suppress the second wave, as religious festivals and political rallies drew tens of thousands of people to "super spreader" events.

"We need a government. Desperately. And we don't have one. We are running out of air. We are dying," the Booker Prize-winning author Arundhati Roy wrote in an opinion piece that called for Modi to step down.

India's delegation to the Group of Seven foreign ministers' meeting in London is self-isolating after two of its members tested positive for Covid-19, Britain said yesterday.

Foreign Minister Subrahmanya Jaishankar, who is in London, said in a Twitter message that he would attend virtually. Broadcaster Sky News said Jaishankar did not test positive for the virus, however.

The eastern state of West Bengal, which dealt Modi's party a defeat in an election last week, suspended local train services and limited working hours for banks and jewellery shops, among its steps to limit infections.

FALL IN VACCINATIONS, TESTING
Medical experts say India's actual figures could be five to 10 times the official tallies. The country has added 10 million cases in just over four months, after taking more than 10 months to reach its first 10 million.

Two "oxygen express" trains carrying liquid oxygen arrived in the capital, New Delhi, yesterday, railways minister Piyush Goyal said on Twitter. More than 25 trains have distributed oxygen supplies nationwide.

The government says supplies are sufficient but transport woes have hindered distribution.

India's surge in infections has coincided with a dramatic drop in vaccinations because of supply and delivery problems.

At least three states, including Maharashtra, home to the commercial capital of Mumbai, have reported a scarcity of vaccines, shutting down some inoculation centres.

Directives hard to enforce

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people and public transport from May 6 to May 16.

The government has been enforcing such restrictions since April 5 to check the sharp rise in Covid-19 cases and deaths in the country, which is battling the second wave of the pandemic.

During the last one month, the government, however, has relaxed many of the restrictions. It reopened shopping malls ahead of Eid and thousands of shoppers are thronging them every day, ignoring health safety rules.

It has alarmed health experts. The experts said the Covid situation in Bangladesh could worsen due to the increased public movement centring the Eid. They warned that the situation can turn dangerous if a new variant found in India made its way here.

Eid will be celebrated in around a week. Passengers welfare organisations estimate that around 80 lakh to 1.2 crore people leave Dhaka, Narayanganj, and Gazipur before Eid every year.

This time, a huge number of people have already left the cities, defying the government embargo. During the two Eids last year, thousands did the same and experts said the coronavirus situation worsened because of it. 'DON'T LEAVE WORK STATIONS'

As per the new circular, officials and other employees of all government, non-government, autonomous offices, banks, and other financial institutions will not be allowed to leave their area during the Eid holidays.

Copy of the circular was sent to, among others, the Inspector General of Police, all divisional commissioners, deputy commissioners and upazila nirbarhi officers "for information and implementation".

Contacted, Shaikh Yusuf Harun, senior secretary of the public administration ministry, said, "All government employees are bound to obey the government order.

"Each and every employee has to take prior permission before leaving their workstations. If anyone leaves workstation without permission, action will be taken as per the service rules," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

Asked about those working at non-government and autonomous offices, he said, "I can comment only about government employees."

Contacted, Haider Ali Khan,

deputy inspector general of the police headquarters, said, "We will work to enforce the government decision."

However, another high-placed official of the police headquarters said it was the duty of the authorities of the office concerned to ensure that the government directive is followed.

"Nothing is clear about the police role in this regard," the official said, wishing not to be named.

RUSH INCREASING
Thousands of people are leaving Dhaka every day by cars, microbuses and small vehicles amid this so-called lockdown, paying extra money.

Ferry services at the Shimulia-Kathalbari and the Paturia-Dauladia routes are experiencing huge pressure of passengers and it is likely to increase even more in the coming week.

A staffer of the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC) at Mawa Ferry Terminal, said they have been operating 12 to 13 ferries every day for the last few days as the number of cars and microbuses waiting to cross the Padma is going up.

"We're not stopping any private vehicles. I have not seen any step from the police side in this regard in the last few days," he said, wishing not to be named.

Zillur Rahman, deputy general manager of the BIWTC's Aricha office, said they operate four to five small ferries and two to three large ferries, if necessary, in the daytime and 14-16 at night.

Replying to a question, he said, "We are supposed to carry ambulance, goods-laden and emergency vehicles, but a huge number of cars and microbuses gather at the terminal every day. How can we send them back?"

A top official at the shipping ministry said cars, microbuses and passengers of other small vehicles are allowed to cross the river using the ferries considering the "ground reality". Because, in absence of ferries, desperate people will board trawlers and speedboats and it may lead to accidents, like the one on Monday.

A speedboat carrying 30 passengers crashed into a sand-laden bulk carrier in the Padma in Madaripur's Shibchar upazila, leaving 26 dead.

State Minister for Shipping Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury, however, said they would operate ferry services on a limited scale and only goods-laden and emergency vehicles would be

allowed to board the ferries.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT INSIDE DISTRICTS

As per yesterday's circular, all inter-district public transport would remain grounded. However, operation of public transport would be allowed inside district territories.

Train and launch services will also remain suspended.

Khondaker Enayet Ullah, secretary general of Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association, said they would operate buses inside districts following the government's directives.

A leader of transport owner association, however, said they were confused and that they did not know whether they could resume their operation ahead of Eid.

He said top operators, who operate long-haul buses, will not resume their services, but small operators may do it, even on the inter-district routes.

"It would be difficult to ensure that buses operate inside the territory of a particular district. Many buses may cross the district boundaries and claim that the bus belongs to another district," he said, wishing anonymity.

WORKERS DEMAND LAUNCH SERVICES

Water transport workers yesterday demonstrated in Dhaka demanding immediate resumption of launch services on all routes across the country.

They said all the health rules will be followed. They also demanded payment of their salaries and arrears by tomorrow.

As per a scheduled programme announced by Bangladesh Noutan Sramik Federation, the workers started a protest procession in front of the central office of the federation in Dhaka and later marched towards the head office of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA).

Speaking at the programme, their leaders said workers of launch and other public transport were affected the most by the "lockdown" as the government did not take any alternative measure to protect their livelihoods.

At the same time, people, including workers, are spending more than twice to travel to their home violating health rules.

Later, a five-member representative team handed a memorandum to the BIWTA chairman, says a press release.

Stock depleting

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Sinopharm vaccines.

The country's drug administration has already given emergency use authorisation to both Sputnik V and Sinopharm to expedite the process of procuring alternative vaccines.

Contacted, Health Minister Zahid Maleque told The Daily Star that they are expecting a response from China soon.

"I assume that due to holidays they [China] could not respond," said the health minister.

He said that the foreign ministry is working closely with the Chinese embassy to expedite the process.

"Once we get the proposal, we will go through the necessary scrutiny process and if everything goes smoothly, we will try to complete the agreement quickly," he said.

The health minister said a flight of Bangladesh Air Force is likely to go to Beijing on May 10 and bring the 5 lakh doses of Sinopharm vaccine.

Health officials had earlier said Sinopharm will be used as the first jab.

The Directorate General of Drug Administration had informed journalists that it would inoculate 1,000 people first and review the outcome before launching mass inoculation.

In early 2020, the Beijing Institute of Biological Products developed an inactivated coronavirus vaccine called BBIBP-CoV, also known as Sinopharm. China, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Pakistan and some other countries across the world are currently using it.

The World Health Organization has yet to approve it, but the WHO's advisory panel said Sinopharm has presented data on its vaccine indicating the levels of efficacy.

As uncertainty mounts over the second dose of Covishield for people who already got the first dose of Covishield, Bangladesh is hopeful of getting the vaccine from the US, which has 60 million extra AstraZeneca doses, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen said yesterday.

US Ambassador Earl R Miller will meet the foreign minister today to update the government about the vaccine, he told reporters at his residence.

"Our ambassador in Washington DC wrote to the [US] state department. I also requested US Ambassador Miller here. Our request is under consideration," Momen said.

He said the US is prioritising Brazil and India, where the Covid-19 situation is worrisome.

The minister said the Indian diaspora community is strongly lobbying the US to give the country all the 60 million AstraZeneca doses.

"I also request our diaspora to lobby the US government to send vaccines to Bangladesh," he said.

Momen said Bangladesh has approached a number of European countries that have AstraZeneca vaccines, but the amount they have is very small.

"The possibility [of getting the vaccine from Europe] is not very high," he said.

RUSSIAN PROPOSAL WITH LAW MINISTRY

Meanwhile, the health ministry sent to the law ministry the Russian government's proposal to supply the vaccines for final scrutiny of the legal aspects of the agreement.

"We are trying heart and soul to complete the process of the agreement. Once we get opinion from the law

ministry, we will send the proposal back to Russia," Syed Mojibul Huq, additional secretary of the health ministry, told The Daily Star yesterday.

In another development, an inter-ministerial meeting on vaccine procurement and distribution was held yesterday to analyse the overall vaccination situation.

"We have discussed how to make the efforts to buy two Covid-19 vaccines [from China and Russia]. Besides, the national committee on vaccine has been expanded with additional jurisdictions," Prof ABM Khurshid Alam, director general of DGHS, said.

"The committee has been asked to prepare a draft report shortly about the efficacy and safety of these two vaccines and when the vaccines will be available," he added.

Bangladesh's mass inoculation programme stumbled after the Serum Institute of India failed to ship the vaccine.

As per an agreement, Bangladesh was supposed to receive three crore shots in six months. Serum delivered the first 50 lakh doses in January, but shipped only 20 lakh in February. No shipment has been made since.

Meanwhile, Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal said yesterday that Bangladesh will get back the money paid for Covishield vaccines if Serum cannot supply any more doses as per the contract.

"We will take the money back when we will finally come to know that no vaccine will be supplied. We will definitely get back the money... Everything was done based on written contracts," he said.

Lowest number

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The overall positivity rate was 13.80 percent.

After the second wave of the pandemic hit the country in the second week of March, the number of daily cases had started going up. The number of daily cases and deaths had broken all previous records.

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

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

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

Meanwhile, 3,433 Covid-19 patients have recovered during the 24-hour period till 8:00am yesterday, raising the total number of recoveries to 698,465.

The recovery rate was 91.02 percent. Among the 50 deceased, 32 were males and 18 females.

Two were aged between 31 and 40 years, five between 41 and 50, 13 between 51 and 60 and 30 were above 60 years, added the release.

With the number of daily coronavirus cases on the decline, most of the general and ICU beds at the Covid-19 dedicated hospitals across the country now remain vacant.

There are 12,542 general beds for coronavirus patients across the country. Of those, 9,622 or more than 75 percent were vacant as of yesterday, according to the DGHS.

Of the total 1,090 ICU beds, 618 or more than half [57 percent] were unoccupied, the data show.

Khaleda's family seeks govt's nod

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She also said they didn't mention the name of any country in the application as possible destination, but they want to take Khaleda to the UK for better treatment.

Meanwhile, hospital sources said Khaleda was having breathing difficulties since yesterday afternoon and also complained of mild chest pain.

She had been stable without oxygen support till noon. But in the afternoon, she started having breathing problems and was given oxygen support, said the sources at the capital's Evercare Hospital where Khaleda is under treatment.

Earlier around 11:00 am, Professor Shahabuddin Talukdar, chief of the 10-member medical board formed to oversee Khaleda's treatment, examined her and suggested conducting an angiogram on her as she complained of mild chest pain.

Khaleda's family members were yet to decide on it, said sources in the family.

Her blood sugar level kept fluctuating between 14 and 18 millimoles per litre, they mentioned.

"She is suffering from post-Covid complications. Her age is a major cause for concern," said one of her family members, quoting doctors.

Khaleda was admitted to the hospital on April 27 night for diagnosis after being tested positive for Covid-19 for the second time on April 24. She was first tested Covid positive on April 11.

On Monday afternoon, Khaleda was shifted to the hospital's Coronary Care Unit with breathing difficulties. She has also been suffering from arthritis, diabetes and eye problems.

Her family members are thinking of taking her to the UK or Thailand or Singapore for better treatment.

HURDLES
Taking Khaleda abroad amid the Covid crisis appears to be an option fraught with difficulties. As the second Covid wave continues to hit Asia hard, many countries have banned entry of people from South Asian nations.

The first choice of Khaleda's family is the UK where her elder son Tarique Rahman, along with his family members, has been staying since September 2008.

Khaleda's family members have

already contacted the UK High Commission in Dhaka, which has given assurance of full cooperation in this regard, one of them told this newspaper.

But the biggest hurdle is that if someone is sentenced for a term exceeding two years, the person cannot enter the UK until the country's home office gives him or her special permission.

Khaleda was sentenced to five years' imprisonment in the Zia Orphanage Trust corruption case. The High Court later doubled her sentence.

"There is a legal bar to that [taking her to the UK]. Besides, she may not be able to make such a long journey because of her health condition, mentioned the family member.

Khaleda's family is considering Singapore as the next option.

But on April 30, Singapore said no visitors, who have been in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka for the last two weeks, will be allowed to enter or transit through the country.

Even if the Bangladesh government allows the BNP chief to go to Singapore, there is a question whether that country will let her in.

Another viable option is Thailand as it is still accepting travellers from Bangladesh. And it takes only two and a half hours to fly to Bangkok from Dhaka.

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.