

BANGLADESH UPDATE



1,682
New cases in 24hrs



7,70,842
Total cases



11,833
Deaths



7,04,341
Recoveries



GLOBAL UPDATE

3,274,320
Deaths



157,026,084
Total cases

CONSUMPTION PROTECTION, EMPLOYMENT PROMOTION Govt should focus on them in next budget

Says Debapriya Bhattacharya

UNB, Dhaka



Consumption protection and employment promotion should be the dual priorities of the upcoming national budget during the pandemic, said renowned economist and public policy analyst Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya.

To this end, the government has to give direct and substantive fiscal support to the traditionally disadvantaged communities as well as to the "new poor", he said in an interview with UNB about the national budget for fiscal year 2021-22.

Debapriya said the new budget also needs to promote domestic market-oriented industrial diversification and introduce a universal social protection system.

He said the expansionary fiscal policy should focus not on maximising the public expenditures for health exigencies, but on putting more disposable income into the hands of disadvantaged households and investable resources into the hands of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs).

The economist said the new budget should neither increase tax rate nor apply new taxes, but should focus on improving efficiency of the tax administration to prevent tax leakages and evasion, stop undue exemptions and definitely discontinue favouring launderers of black money.

Noting that one of the fundamental issues for the next budget would be

dealing with the protracted impact of the pandemic, Debapriya said the last budget was done under the incorrect assumption that the pandemic would vanish within 3-4 months and then normalcy would be restored in the economy.

"At that time, we pointed out that even if health emergencies subside, socio-economic impact of pandemic will be felt much longer. Now 12 months later, we are in the midst of another Covid peak."

The basic point is that, under the circumstances, public expenditure choices and other fiscal decisions within one-year time-frame is not appropriate from policy perspectives, he said.

"So, a 'core budget' focused on defeating the pandemic and recovering from the fallout demand a time policy frame of at least two-three years. This has to be aligned with the current Five Year Plan [2021-25], SDG delivery schedule and climate action commitments," Debapriya added.

He observed that the development variable needs to be reprioritised from the point of view of employment retention and generation and no less important will be protection of consumption.

Favouring an expansionary fiscal policy, he emphasised the need for accelerating public expenditures and improving supply of liquidity to boost domestic demand for goods and services.



Recovered from Covid-19, Sakila Khatun waits with her luggage to board an ambulance at Dhaka Medical College Hospital yesterday. A staffer of the hospital is seeing her off. The 33-year-old woman travelled to her home in Savar's Nabinagar after undergoing treatment at the DMCH for 16 days.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Mad rush home as curbs eased

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There, transport workers gave them two options: either hire a car for Tk 10,000 or pay Tk 1,500 per person.

"We have only Tk 3,000 left with us. So we have to go to the ferry ghat somehow and cross the Padma river. From there, we will go to our destination by changing buses," Shihab told The Daily Star yesterday.

Like them, people in their hundreds were seen waiting for transport to reach the country's northern and southwestern districts.

Transport workers were busy negotiating the fares with them.

Talking to this newspaper, many passengers said they were being charged almost double the usual bus fare.

For Jashore or Magura, transport workers were asking for Tk 1,500-2,000 from each person. A car bound to Paturia ferry ghat was asking for Tk 500 from each passenger.

Inside the vehicle, maintaining physical distance was a far cry. People sat in close proximity.

"My family lives in Satkhira and it will be extremely difficult for me to stay here alone during the Eid. So I along with two of my friends rented a car and we are going to my home via the Mawa ghat," said Sirajul Alam, a private firm employee, at Gabtoli.

Many passengers were found sharing CNG auto-rickshaw and riding motorbikes from Gabtoli. CNG drivers said that they were charging Tk 300 from each passenger to take them to the Paturia ghat while the bikers said that they would go up to Chandra, Paturia ghat or Mawa.

Some passengers went to Amin Bazar and Hemayetpur by these vehicles and then took buses in phases to go to the Paturia ghat via Shingair and Manikganj.

Police set up check posts on key highways to enforce the Covid-19 restrictions, but failed to stop the rush of home-goers. To dodge the law enforcers, many even opted to start their journey just after taking Sehri early in the morning.

Some transport workers alleged that they bribe police Tk 200 for each car. Whoever does not pay is caught and fined by the law enforcers. This newspaper, however, could not verify it.

Not maintaining physical distancing, people were seen leaving in microbuses and pickups on the Dhaka-Chattogram and the Dhaka-Sylhet highways, our correspondents reported.

Visiting the Signboard and Shimrail intersections in Narayanganj Sadar apazila from 10:00am to 1:00pm yesterday, our Narayanganj correspondent found that some transport workers set up illegal ticket counters under the sheds of different bus services and took passengers one by one into microbuses.

At least 10 to 12 passengers in each microbus were seen leaving for their destinations in Chattogram, Cumilla and Chandpur. Policemen in the nearby traffic police box took no action at that time.

The fare for Chattogram was Tk 1,000, for Comilla Tk 500 and for Chandpur Tk 800-1,000 per person.

Jalal Mia, who boarded a microbus for Chattogram, said, "Despite all the fear over the Covid-19 and the transport ban on long-haul buses, I have to go to my family. I could not be with them during the last two Eid due to the coronavirus."

He said he paid Tk 1,000, whereas the bus fare would be Tk 400.

Meanwhile, sources said traffic police at Signboard and Shimrail fined at least 25 cars and microbuses from 8:00am to 1:00pm yesterday for violating the health safety rules.

RENTAL SERVICE PEAKED
Since the government imposed restrictions on public buses, demand for rental cars and microbuses has risen sharply. The vehicles are being operated on rent day and night.

Many rental car service providers are posting ads on Facebook to draw the attention of homebound people. Some were even giving "Eid discounts".

"AC Private Car Service from Dhaka to any district, contact us. We will also

manage the movement pass," reads a Facebook post by one Razia Rent-a-Car.

Another one, Pacific Rent-a-Car, posted on social media that they would give a special discount ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr.

Many passengers, however, said they were paying extra.

Four students of a public university at Dhaka, who went to Gaibandha yesterday from the capital, told The Daily Star that they hired a four-seater for Tk 10,000 for a one-way journey. Previously, the rent was Tk 7,000.

RUSH AT FERRY TERMINALS
Ferry services at the Shimulia-Kathalbari and the Paturia-Dauladia routes experienced huge pressure of passengers and it is likely to increase even more in the coming days.

Due to the holiday yesterday, the rush increased manifold at the Paturia ferry terminal in Manikganj, the gateway to 21 districts in the southern part of the country.

Zillur Rahman, deputy general manager of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority's (BIWTA) Aricha office said out of 16 ferries, three were plying the Paturia-Dauladia route.

Some 300 hundred vehicles, both small and big, are waiting to cross the river, the official added, while talking to this newspaper yesterday evening.

But the crowd of people was even higher on the Munshiganj's Shimulia ferry terminal as launches and speedboats were not allowed to operate after the speedboat accident in Madaripur's Shibchar recently, said BIWTC officials.

Unable to cope with the huge rush, some ferries departed without taking a single vehicle on board. As a result, over a thousand freight and private vehicles got stuck, reported our correspondent.

Safayat Ahmed, manager (commerce) of BIWTC at Shimulia ferry terminal, told The Daily Star that three of the 16 ferries on the Shimulia-Banglabazar route were out of work, so it has been difficult to cope with the crowds with only 13 ferries running.

Ctg Hefajat leader sued over rape

5 more activists held over recent mayhem

FM MIZANUR RAHAMAN

A rape case has been filed against Jakaria Noman Fayezi, publicity secretary of the recently dissolved Hefajat-e-Islam central committee, in Chattogram, said police.

A woman filed the case with Hathazari Police Station early yesterday, confirmed Abdullah Al Masum, additional superintendent of Chattogram police.

According to the case statement, the plaintiff became acquainted with Fayezi through social media in September of 2019.

In November, the same year, she came to Hathazari upazila where Fayezi rented a house for her to stay, the police officer said, quoting the case statement.

"Fayezi raped the victim many times over the next year," the statement added.

Meanwhile, five Hefajat men were arrested in Brahmanbaria over the mayhem in the district following Narendra Modi's visit on March 26, said Roish Uddin, additional superintendent of the district police.

The total number of arrestees over the violence now stands at 439 and a total of 57 cases have been lodged over the violence against some 414 named and 39,000 unnamed people, read a police press release.

In another development, two Hefajat leaders were sent to jail yesterday after they were produced before a Dhaka court in a case filed with Paltan Police Station.

They are Maulana Jubair Ahmed, Dhaka City unit vice-president of

Hefajat's now-dissolved committee, and Maulana Jalaluddin Ahmed, its assistant general secretary.

Metropolitan Magistrate Begum Yasmin Ara passed the order after Sub-Inspector Enamul Haque of Paltan Police Station produced them before the court on completion of their three-day remand in the case.

In the forwarding report, the SI, who is also the investigation officer of the case, said the two leaders, while on remand, gave important information.

Also, the accused did not submit any petition seeking bail in the case. After the hearing, the magistrate sent the duo to Dhaka Central Jail in Keraniganj.

Jubair was arrested from Lalbagh on April 16 while Jalal was arrested from Mohammadpur on April 17.

In Narayanganj, an activist of Chhatra Dal gave his confessional statement before a court in a case filed over the violence during the strike observed by Hefajat.

SP Monirul Islam of the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI) in Narayanganj, in a press release, said the Chhatra Dal activist Rakib Hossain, 19, gave the confessional statement involving his role before a senior judicial magistrate.

Rakib, along with three leaders of Jubo Dal and Chhatra Dal, was held by police during the violence on March 28.

Later, Rakib was taken into remand in a case filed over subversive activities.

FM Mizanur from Chattogram, Masuk Hridoy from Brahmanbaria, and Sunny Shaha from Narayanganj contributed to this report.

Khaleda improving

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We may also seek visas for Singapore and Thailand," said a top BNP leader.

BNP sources said Khaleda's family members received "a positive signal" from the UK government regarding her treatment in a London hospital.

BNP leaders said getting the government approval remained the main challenge as she was released from jail through an executive order of the government on the condition that she does not leave the country.

That is why Khaleda's brother Shamim Iskandar wrote to the home ministry seeking approval on Wednesday night.

The BNP chairperson can be flown abroad if the law ministry amends the order, BNP sources added.

Khaleda did a medical checkup in Singapore before her imprisonment, and if the government of the city-state allows, she might be flown there.

If they fail to take her to Singapore, her family members will consider taking her to Thailand.

Khaleda's younger son Arafat Rahman Koko's in-laws live in Thailand, and when Koko was released from jail after the army-backed caretaker government assumed office in 2007, Koko went to Thailand and stayed there for five years.

Khaleda's family members are also considering taking her to the UAE and get her treated there for a few days before leaving for London. That travel time can be divided that way.

"The family prefers London because her son Tarique Rahman has been living there since September 2008. But everything depends on the government's approval and her physical condition," said a party source.

Khaleda was admitted to Evercare Hospital on April 27, three days after she tested positive for coronavirus for a second time. She first tested positive on April 11. She also has arthritis, diabetes and eye problems.

She was taken to the hospital's Coronary Care Unit with breathing difficulties Monday afternoon.

The government released Khaleda from jail on March 25 last year, suspending her sentence as per section 401 (1) of the Criminal Code of Procedure. The suspension was later extended twice.

The BNP chairperson landed in jail on February 8, 2018, after a special court sentenced her to five years in prison in the Zia Orphanage Trust corruption case. On October 30, 2018, the High Court raised her punishment to 10 years.

Russia offers Sputnik V jabs for \$9.95 each

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health ministry official told The Daily Star yesterday.

The Bangladesh government also proposed that the Russian authority will have to take the responsibility if it fails to supply the vaccine in due time.

There is a gap between administrations of the two shots and that is why the supply of the second dose should reach Bangladesh on time, the official said.

The proposal also mentioned that 50 percent of the price of the vaccine should be paid in advance, said the official.

Earlier, Health Minister Zahid Maleque told The Daily Star that they got the agreement document from the foreign ministry on Monday.

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

"We are trying to sign the agreement at the earliest," the 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 emergency use of Sputnik V in the country.

Bangladesh's mass inoculation programme suffered serious setbacks after the Indian government restricted the export of 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 the Russian vaccine arrives.

Sputnik V is the second vaccine the Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA) approved after giving the go ahead to Covishield, the AstraZeneca vaccine, on January 4.

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

Russia approved the Sputnik V vaccine for domestic use in August last year. The country claimed that its efficacy is around 91 percent.

Recruitment rules violated freely

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political leaders. Once appointed, the VCs remain loyal to the leaders who lobbied for them. This is how the corruption starts," Prof Wahid said.

Prof Bokhtiar Ahmed of the university's Department of Anthropology said, "This has been the most frustrating situation in my two decades of teaching. I can see the death of a public university."

He said the senate had been ineffective since 2016 and there has been no students' representative in the Senate.

"When a vice-chancellor is appointed solely on political consideration, it is difficult for him or her to work without corruption."

Prof Selim Reza Newton said it was astounding that Prof Sobhan was not removed even after the UGC reported his corruption.

"The government that could not rely on him to recruit people trusted him to run the university," he said.

Law teachers explained that the RU Act also stresses on education and research, not financial activities. The law says that the VC would be "a whole-time principal academic" and an executive officer.

The VC shall have the power to recruit, on a purely temporary basis for a period of not more than six months, by reporting to the syndicate, the law says.

But the UGC report reveals that Prof Sobhan flouted all the laws.

UGC REPORT
The UGC investigated 17 allegations

made by the RU teachers and job seekers and found them to be true.

"Each of the allegations of corruption, irregularities and nepotism proved moral turpitude beyond doubt," the report reads.

Prof Sobhan ended his first term as the VC in 2013 amid allegations of recruiting some 330 teachers against 204 advertised posts and 344 other employees.

At the beginning of his second term in May 2017, Prof Sobhan relaxed the Standard Policies of 2015 for educational qualifications of job seekers.

"Relaxing of policies opened the door for lowering the quality of the university's education and research," the UGC report says.

At least 34 teachers, including Prof Sobhan's daughter and son-in-law, were appointed through relaxing the rule.

The probe found several examples of recruitment of people who are not eligible to apply, and of rejecting job seekers with more qualifications than the ones who got hired.

The UGC probe documented incidents of seeking and receiving bribes from the job seekers by Prof Sobhan and several top officials of the administration.

The illegal recruitments are likely to be a burden on the national exchequer while the under-qualified teachers and officers would become barriers to achieving sustainable development goals for education, it said.

The report also said the RU authorities didn't cooperate with the investigation

which in itself is a punishable offence. The people facing the allegations claimed to be innocent, but failed to provide documents to support their claim.

Based on the report, the Ministry of Education in December last year issued the embargo on recruitment.

But in January, the RU administration received a humanitarian request from the Prime Minister's Office to hire a physically challenged person as an officer. The Daily Star has a copy of the request.

According to newspaper reports citing audio clips, Prof Sobhan took it as an opportunity and asked job seekers to demonstrate against him demanding recruitment.

Then he began a process of recruitment, but his attempts were unsuccessful until Thursday.

Besides hiring some 50 ruling party men, most of the 137 new recruits got the job by paying bribes and having political leaders lobby for them.

The Daily Star tried all day long to reach Prof Sobhan yesterday, but he did not respond. However, Bangla Tribune quoted him claiming his innocence. "I was forced to give appointments on my last work day. No one cooperated with me to follow the due process. That's why I took it as a challenge," he said.

About the ministry order terming the recruitment illegal, he said, "No one has the authority to declare the recruitments illegal. I did it following the rules. I have legal power to appoint teachers and staffers on an ad hoc basis."

India's Covid

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India yesterday reported another record daily rise in coronavirus cases, 414,188, bringing total new cases for the week to 1.57 million. Deaths from Covid-19 rose by 3,915 to 234,083.

Experts said the reported figures likely underplay the real toll because the nation's crematoriums and hospitals have been overwhelmed. That makes the assessment of any peak particularly complicated.

Still, estimates may become crucial because PM Modi has been avoiding a national lockdown, choosing instead to allow states to implement their own restrictions to curb the spread.

"Our predictions are that the peak will come within a few days," Mathukumalli Vidyasagar, professor at the Indian Institute of Technology in Hyderabad, said by email Thursday, referring to a model prepared with Manindra Agrawal, a professor from IIT Kanpur.

"As per current projections, we should hit 20,000 cases per day by the end of June. We will revise this as needed."

In April, Vidyasagar's team wrongly predicted that the wave would peak by the middle of last month. That was due to incorrect parameters as "the pandemic was changing rapidly, even wildly, until about a week ago," he wrote on Twitter at the time.

More recently, Vidyasagar, also head of a government-appointed group of scientists modelling the trajectory of infections, told Reuters that the peak would be between May 3-5, and then the India Today publication that it would come on May 7.

Scientists are largely agreed that the coming few weeks will be difficult for India. A team at the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore used a mathematical model to predict about 404,000 deaths will occur by June 11 if current trends continue. India's death toll from the pandemic has already crossed 200,000.

Meanwhile, K Vijay Raghavan, principal scientific advisor to centre, said yesterday, "If we take strong measures, the third wave may not happen in all the places or indeed anywhere at all. It depends much on how effectively the guidance is implemented at the local level, in the states, in districts and in the cities everywhere."

However, India's main opposition leader Rahul Gandhi yesterday warned that unless the deadly second wave sweeping the country was brought under control it would decimate India as well as threaten the rest of the world.

Meanwhile tonnes of medical equipment from abroad has starting to arrive in Delhi hospitals, in what could ease the pressure on an overburdened system.

NEPAL'S CASES SKYROCKET
In neighbouring Nepal, health workers and authorities are struggling to contain a massive surge of Covid-19 cases as infections spill over from India's deadly second wave.

In last three weeks, Nepal's daily case trajectory has shot up with two out of five people tested now returning positive. On Thursday, Nepal reported 8,970 cases, the highest single day increase.

More than 3,500 people have died since the pandemic began, 400 of them in the last two weeks alone, according to official figures.

"Health facilities have been flooded with symptomatic cases... The situation could become worse in the coming days," Hemanta Chandra Ojha at Nepal's Epidemiology and Disease Control Division told AFP.

British health officials yesterday labelled a coronavirus variant first found in India a "variant of concern" due to evidence it spreads more easily, with Prime Minister Boris Johnson saying the situation needed careful handling.

Public Health England (PHE) designated variant B.1.617.2, one of three variants identified in India that has spread to Britain, a variant of concern. Surge testing was being carried out in areas where evidence indicates community spread.

Australia will lift a ban on its citizens returning from Covid-ravaged India next week, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said yesterday, as state officials reported that an outbreak in Sydney appeared to be contained.

One in every 10

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Yesterday, 37 more people died from Covid-19, according to the DGHS.

The total number of deaths is 11,833. Some 17,013 samples were tested across the country in 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday.

At least 2,178 coronavirus patients have recovered during the period. The total number of recoveries now stands at 704,341 and the recovery rate now is 91.37 percent.

Of the 37 deceased, 23 were men and 14 women. Of them, one was aged between 31 and 40, five were within 41-50, 11 within 51-60, and 20 were above 60 years old, added the release.

Dhaka division has the highest number of death toll -- 6,879, while Mymensingh division has seen the lowest number of deaths -- 245.

Out of each one million people of the country, about 4,526 have so far been infected with coronavirus since March 8 last year.

During this period, nearly 70 people out of each one million died of Covid-19, added the DGHS.

Across the country, there are 12,048 general beds for Covid patients. Yesterday, 2,650 of the beds were occupied by patients. Out of the 1,072 ICU beds, 443 were occupied.

Till Thursday noon