



A woman holds on to the oxygen cylinders for a patient after refilling them at a factory, amidst the spread of coronavirus disease (Covid-19) surge as India's outbreak spreads across South Asia, in Kathmandu, Nepal yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Junta brands rival govt

FROM PAGE 12 mechanism of the government," the announcement said.

The anti-terrorism law bans not only membership of the groups, but also any contact with them. The junta had previously accused its opponents of treason.

Protesters marched against the junta in dozens of places on Saturday. At least 774 civilians have been killed by security forces and 3,778 are detained, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners activist group.

The junta disputes those figures and says at least two dozen members of the security forces have been killed in protests.

Fighting has also flared on Myanmar's periphery with ethnic armies that have been fighting for decades and some of which have rallied behind the protesters. State television said the army had advanced against the Kachin Independence Army in northern Myanmar, but there was no independent confirmation.

In western Myanmar, the newly formed Chinland Defence Force said it had overrun an army camp. The army made no comment on the report.

Meanwhile, Myanmar poet Khet

Thi, whose works declare resistance to the ruling junta, died in detention overnight and his body was returned with the organs removed, his family said yesterday.

A spokesman for the junta did not answer calls to request comment on the death of Khet Thi, who had penned the line "They shoot in the head, but they don't know the revolution is in the heart." His Facebook page said he was 45.

Myanmar's army took power alleging fraud in a November election that was swept by the party of Suu Kyi, who fought for democracy for decades before tentative reforms began a decade ago. The electoral commission had rejected the army's complaints.

Man sent to jail

FROM PAGE 12 family members. She was admitted to hospital.

The victim's uncle filed a case against Sumon with Alfadanga Police Station on May 1.

Police then conducted several drives to arrest Sumon.

On a tip-off, they arrested him from Bejjidanga bridge area under Kashiani upazila in Gopalganj around 12:45am on Sunday, added Jamal Pasha.

Iraqi activist's killing sparks protests against impunity

AFP, Karbala

A leading Iraqi anti-government activist was killed early yesterday, security sources and activists said, sending supporters of a protest movement onto the streets to demand an end to bloodshed.

Ihab al-Wazni, a coordinator of protests in the Shia shrine city of Karbala, was a vocal opponent of corruption, the stronghold of Tehran-linked armed groups and Iran's influence in Iraq.

He was shot overnight outside his home by men on motorbikes, in an ambush caught on surveillance cameras. His death was confirmed by security forces and activists.

Wazni narrowly escaped death in December 2019, when men on motorbikes used silenced weapons to kill fellow activist Fahem al-Tai as he was dropping him home in Karbala, where pro-Tehran armed groups are legion.

Work delayed, wait prolonged

FROM PAGE 12 that the DPP be revised later, sources said.

The project -- which is being implemented with mostly donor funds at a cost of Tk 6504.54 crore -- witnessed 73 percent progress till February this year.

THE BOTTLENECK

The Dhaka-Chattogram rail line, the most important corridor of Bangladesh's railway network, also constitutes a major part of the Trans-Asian Railway and the Sub-regional railway corridor.

A double-track rail line between the capital and country's second largest city is essential for passenger and goods transportation.

Twelve passenger trains use the section for round-trips on the Dhaka-Chattogram, Dhaka-Noakhali, and Chattogram-Sylhet routes daily.

Besides, five freight trains use the section for daily round-trips on the Dhaka-Chattogram route.

All these trains have to spend at least an additional 46 minutes due to the ongoing work. Sometimes, delays last more than an hour, officials said.

All the trains on the single line have to wait at nearby stations to make way for each other, causing delays in their schedules.

"Besides, operation of trains on a single line often causes safety concerns," a mid-level BR official told The Daily Star recently.

BR cannot operate the increasing number of freight trains on the Dhaka-Chattogram route due to the bottleneck, he said requesting anonymity.

Officials also said Subarna Express, which is supposed to take five hours and 10 minutes for the Dhaka-Chattogram trip, takes around six and a half hours.

CONTRACTS EXPIRING Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the project works remained suspended for more than two months last year and the authority extended the deadline till next month.

BR signed a four-year contract with CTM Joint Venture in June 2016 for construction work of the Akhaura-Lakhsam double line and conversion of the existing line into dual gauge.

The contract expired in November 2020 and financier Asian Development

Bank (ADB) on February 15 this year gave "no objection" to a proposal of the project authorities for a two-year extension of the contract, documents show.

The tenure of contracts with construction supervision consultants and an INGO engaged for implementation of the resettlement work will expire next month.

Another contract with an INGO for giving training for capacity building and some other work expired on April 23.

In these circumstances, the project authorities initially wanted to revise the DPP but with the revision process being complex and time-consuming, they proposed at a meeting of the railways ministry in February that the deadline be extended till June 2023 without cost escalation, sources said.

But the project authorities were told to place only a proposal for a one-year time extension for now, they added.

No time extension has been approved till date.

REASONS FOR THE DELAYS

The project witnessed only seven percent progress in one year, from February 2020, documents show.

Project Director Shahidul Islam said the work came to a near halt for more than two months last year and the pandemic also disturbed the supply chain of construction materials.

Complications regarding land acquisition and resettlement of non-titled people -- meaning people who are not owners of the land to be acquired but who have been living and doing business there for a long time, he said.

They have to go through a lengthy negotiation process to relocate four food godowns from the construction site and in January the food department agreed to this, he told The Daily Star on March 22.

They also had to change the height of some bridges and subsequently the embankment during the project implementation period, Shahidul Islam said.

"So, we think that the project will take two more years including a one-year defects liability period and we have already sought an extension

of the project deadline without cost escalation," he said, declining to specify the extension tenure.

A defects liability period is the period of time since the completion of a project during which a contractor has the right to return to the site to remedy defects.

"We have sought time extension due to ground realities," the PD said.

The work of a 10km portion from Lakhsam to Lalmai is nearly completed and was set to be opened for the public by the first week of April, according to the PD.

But restrictions on public transport imposed from April 5 to check the coronavirus spread suspended train operations and so, the 10km portion could not be opened.

The PD further said though they will ultimately have to revise the DPP, the total cost of the project may not be increased.

BEST OPTION IGNORED FOR DECADES

Although full transformation of the "lengthy" Dhaka-Chattogram line into double lines will significantly cut journey time, BR officials and experts don't consider this the best option for reducing journey time.

Construction of a chord line (route across the outer parts of an urban area) between Dhaka and Cumilla would reduce the distance from Dhaka to Chattogram from the existing 320km to around 230km, they said.

Discussion for the construction of a chord line went on for decades, with the railways ministry even sending a proposal for constructing the line under a public-private partnership proposal in 2012 but this did not see much progress due to unknown reasons, they said.

Instead, talks moved to constructing a high-speed rail from Dhaka-Chattogram -- according to a feasibility study carried out by BR, the project will cost \$11.13 billion.

Some BR officials and transport experts termed the project "highly ambitious" and said the authorities should rather build the chord line as the best option to reduce travel time between the two major cities.

BR will now carry a feasibility study for the chord line under a project funded by ADB, sources said.

গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ সরকার স্বাস্থ্য ও পরিবার কল্যাণ মন্ত্রণালয় স্বাস্থ্য শিক্ষা ও পরিবার কল্যাণ বিভাগ চিকিৎসা শিক্ষা-১ শাখা বাংলাদেশ সচিবালয়, ঢাকা-১০০০ www.mefwd.gov.bd

Nazrul pledges socialism

FROM PAGE 12 with any buildings near them. Bangalees working for Electrical Supply Company of East Pakistan were indiscriminately killed by the Pakistan army, added the New York Times.

Browne also reported killing of a large number of Biharis in Chittagong. PAKISTAN ENVOY, SEEKING AID, MEETS US PRESIDENT

President Richard Nixon met today with a special emissary from Pakistan President Yahya Khan who was in the US to convince American and international monetary officials to bail out the nearly bankrupt country that had been wrecked by war.

The emissary, MM Ahmad, was Yahya's top economic adviser. He was understood to have been carrying a letter from Yahya to Nixon, but the White House declined to give any details of the 30-minute meeting.

The White House only disclosed, in response to reporters' inquiries, that the meeting was to take place.

Diplomatic sources said the message to Nixon contended that stories of large-scale massacres in East Pakistan had been grossly exaggerated, although Yahya reportedly conceded that his army's initial action was tough.

Yahya reportedly wrote that this was

made necessary because East Pakistan's dominant Awami League party had been taken over by "extremists". But, according to this account of the message, he was ready to implement the party's six-point programme for the province's autonomy once moderates were restored to control of the Awami League.

Ahmad's visit came as congressional pressure was building against any US aid to the Pakistan government that could contribute to repression of the independence movement in Bangladesh. The House Foreign Affairs Committee scheduled hearings on Pakistan for May 11, with Sen Edward M Kennedy scheduled to testify in support of the Bangladesh government and advocate international economic sanctions against the Pakistani central government.

MM Ahmad was said to be proposing a number of measures, including devaluation of the Pakistani rupee by half or more; temporary payment of the international consortium of Pakistan's creditors in rupees instead of in hard currency, and "association" of civilians, including "rational" elements from East Pakistan, with Yahya's military government.

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It may

FROM PAGE 12 THE WHO recently listed B.1.617 -- which counts several sub-lineages with slightly different mutations and characteristics -- as a "variant of interest".

But so far it has stopped short of adding it to its short list of "variants of concern" -- a label indicating it is more dangerous than the original version of the virus by being more transmissible, deadly or able to get past vaccine protections.

Several national health authorities, including in the United States and Britain, have meanwhile said they consider B.1.617 a variant of concern, and Swaminathan said she expected the WHO to soon follow suit.

"B.1.617 is likely to be a variant of concern because it has some mutations which increase transmission, and which also potentially could make (it) resistant to antibodies that are generated by vaccination or by natural infection," she said.

But she insisted that the variant alone could not be blamed for the dramatic surge in cases and deaths seen in India, pointing to "huge social mixing and large gatherings" in recent months.

"TAKING OFF VERTICALLY" "In a large country like India, you could have transmission at low levels, which is what happened for many months," Swaminathan said.

Virgin

FROM PAGE 12 Executive Josh Giegel, who gave Reuters an exclusive tour of the pod used in its November test run, where it was propelled along a 500 meter (1,640 ft)tunnel.

"You won't even have turbulence because our system is basically completely able to react to all that turbulence. Think noise-canceling but bump-canceling, if you will."

Off-white materials and a back mirror make the pod seem bigger and more "inviting" for new users, Giegel said.

"This pod was really the embodiment of 'How do we take something that's an idea and make it into something that's a reality for us to sit in?'" Giegel said.

The pods will seat 28 passengers and could be customized for long and short distances, and for freight.

While it is still at an early stage, Giegel predicts commercial operations as early as 2027. It could be the first form of transport in 100 years to revolutionize travel, just like cars, trains and planes did, Giegel said.

গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ সরকার নির্বাহী প্রকৌশলীর কার্যালয়, সওজ সড়ক বিভাগ, বরিশাল ফোনঃ ০৪৩১-৬৪১৮৫, ফ্যাক্সঃ ০৪৩১-৬১৮৪৪ E-mail: eebar@rhd.gov.bd