

**BANGLADESH UPDATE**



**1,230**  
New cases in 24hrs



**7,76,257**  
Total cases



**12,005**  
Deaths



**7,15,321**  
Recoveries



**3,323,716**  
Deaths



**160,021,385**  
Total cases

## High Boro yield expected

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Boro yield is expected to shoot up to 20 million tonnes this year as its production increased by 0.2 tonne per hectares of land thanks to the rise in a hybrid high-yield variety rice and its expansion, according to the Ministry of Agriculture.

It might take three to five years for Bangladesh to attain self-sufficiency in rice production, said Agriculture Minister Muhammad Abdur Razzaque yesterday at a press briefing at the secretariat.

Around 55 percent of the country's total rice harvest comes from Boro but flash floods and excessive rains bring challenges each year.

Movement restrictions due to the Covid-19 brought on another challenge.

"The government expedited measures in distributing reapers and transport harvesters," he said.

Till yesterday, cent percent of Boro in seven districts was harvested. Nationwide, 64 percent was harvested.

Razzaque said the average yield of Boro was 3.97 tonnes per hectare. This year, the yield reached 4.17 tonnes per hectare.

Last year, Boro was cultivated on 47,54,447 hectares of land. This year it was cultivated on 48.83 lakh hectares.

"The government put emphasis on the cultivation of the hybrid variety... it had distributed hybrid seeds worth about Tk 76 crore for free to 14.97 lakh farmers to cultivate on two lakh hectares of land," he said.

The Agriculture minister said, "Our

projection is 2.05 crore tonnes of rice this year. Last year, it was 1.96 crore tonnes. Unless any natural calamity hits the country, hopefully, we will be able to complete harvest without any trouble."

Meanwhile, the recent heat wave affected Boro cultivation on 21,292 hectares of six districts of the country, damaging about 95,934 tonnes of rice, according to the ministry.

The government has also taken measures to increase the production of Aush paddy. The ministry projected a harvest of 34.85 lakh tonnes of Aush from 13.30 lakh hectares of land.

The government has already distributed seeds and fertilisers to 4.50 lakh farmers, in this regard.

Razzaque also said the government, on the other hand, has set a target to produce over 35 lakh tonnes of onions to cover the deficit of its annual demand. Right now, the annual demand is 30 lakh tonnes and, to meet it, about 6-10 lakh tonnes is imported.

"A roadmap is formulated to produce a summer variety of onions and become self-sufficient [in onion production] within three years. To make the plan successful, an initiative was taken to import 35 tonnes of onion seeds from India."

Replying to a question, he said the country spends US\$ 2.5 billion each year to import edible oil. The ministry has developed a new variety of high-yield mustard.

Razzaque hopes the mustard oil will reduce pressure on the production of edible oil.



An inside view of a car of the country's first Metro Rail train. The first test run of the train was held at the metro rail depot at the capital's Diabari yesterday. Inset, high officials of Bangladesh and Japan, including the Japanese ambassador to Bangladesh, on a train car.

PHOTO: PID

## Metro dream whistles

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Mass Rapid Transit Line-6 or MRT-6, the country's first metro rail system, is being built from the capital's Uttara to Motijheel at a cost of Tk 22,000 crore.

Once complete, the metro rail -- with 16 stations -- will be able to carry 60,000 people an hour, reducing travel time from Uttara to Motijheel to around 40 minutes.

It now takes about two hours on a regular day.

### 'NOT A DREAM ANYMORE'

The first set of metro trains reached Dhaka on April 21 and the depot two days later, registering a major development for the government's fast-track project.

Each train with six cars that can carry a maximum 2,308 people at a time. It was manufactured by Kawasaki Heavy Industries Ltd in Japan, said officials.

Dhaka Mass Transit Company Ltd, the agency implementing the high-profile project, organised a programme at the depot yesterday to display the train.

Joining the programme virtually, Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader said, "Metro rail is no more a dream. It's a reality now."

After completion of the "receiving inspection", a functional test is now going on inside the depot, the minister said. Performance test of the train would be carried out on the viaduct in August, he said.

After the programme, the first metro train was driven to the car unloading zone from a workshop at a speed of 5km per hour. It whistled on its way.

When it reached the zone at 11:53am after crossing around half a kilometre from the depot, officials, engineers and workers gathered there started clapping.

Although the train was operated automatically, an experienced loco master of Kawasaki Heavy Industries was inside, said officials.

Then, Road Transport and Highway Division's Secretary Nazrul Islam, DMTCL's managing director MAN Siddique, Japanese ambassador to Bangladesh Ito Naoki, Chief Representative of Jica's Dhaka office Yuho Hayakawa, and a few other officials entered the train and inspected it for a few minutes.

After around 40 minutes, the train was driven back to the workshop.

### 'MIGHT TAKE ANOTHER YEAR'

After the inspection, MAN Siddique said they began the performance test yesterday and would continue it inside the depot.

Then, they would operate the train on a test track for speed tests. After that they would carry out the performance test on rail tracks on the viaduct before going for the integrity test.

During the integrity test, they will check whether synchronisation of everything was done properly and whether they were ready to go for a trial run, he said.

Citing experience of different countries, he told The Daily Star later, it takes six months to a year, even more in some cases, to complete all these tests.

"It actually depends on how perfectly all the structures are made. We are hopeful that we'll not take more time than other countries as prominent companies from Japan and other countries are involved in our project," he said.

"Records are made to be broken.... So we will try to reduce the time required to complete all these tests. However, we won't be able to ignore international standards," he said.

Replying to a question, he said, "It may take up to 10 weeks to complete both tests [with and without passengers] and then we will go for launching the service."

The original implementation period of the project was 2012-2024. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina later directed that metro services from Uttara to Agargaon be made operational by 2019, and from Agargaon to Motijheel by 2020.

Failing to meet the deadline, the authorities in May 2019 said the project would be launched on December 16 when the country celebrates the golden jubilee of its independence.

Speaking at yesterday's programme, RTHD's Secretary Nazrul Islam said they, following the instruction of the prime minister, had taken an initiative to commission the project in December.

"But we have to deviate from the deadline due to the global corona [Covid-19] pandemic. However, we are hopeful about completing the project ahead of the deadline [June 2024]," he said.

## 'We'll decide our foreign policy'

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sought comments on Chinese Ambassador Li Jiming's remarks on "Quad" and Bangladesh.

Momen said they recall with respect what others say, but did not expect such behaviour from China.

"Naturally, he [ambassador] represents a country. They can say what they want. Maybe they don't want it [Bangladesh's joining Quad]."

The minister said no one from the Quad has approached Bangladesh yet. "The comment has been an advanced one."

He said China usually does not interfere in others' internal affairs and that they did not see anyone saying anything in such an aggressive way. "It's very regrettable."

Momen said China can say their position and Bangladesh always welcomes what others say. "We will listen to what they say. But we will decide what is good for us."

He said once the United States had asked Bangladesh to sell gas but Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina replied to the power like the US that Bangladesh would decide after keeping reserve for 50 years. "Who are you?"

The minister said they are lucky that they have a leader like Prime Minister

Sheikh Hasina.

He said Bangladesh will decide following the foreign policy principle considering the interest of the people and the country.

Momen said Bangladesh maintained a non-aligned and a balanced foreign policy and it would continue to do so.

"What he [ambassador] said [is] fine. We've no special comment on that," he said.

Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Li Jiming on Monday said Bangladesh's relations with China will "substantially get damaged" if the country joins "Quad", a US-led initiative.

The envoy said obviously it will not be a good idea for Bangladesh to participate in this small club of four countries.

"So, we don't like to see any form of participation by Bangladesh to this small group of countries," said the envoy.

He termed "Quad" a military alliance aiming against China's resurgence and its relationship with neighbours.

The US, India, Japan, and Australia are part of an informal strategic alliance -- the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad as it is known.

Representatives of the four member nations met periodically since its establishment in 2007.

## Left out in their hour of need

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"The government's stimulus packages are definitely praiseworthy, but their implementation is weak," said Selim Raihan, executive director of South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM), a think-tank.

"The people who were trying to turn around from the devastating impact of the pandemic have been affected once again in the second wave. If the government could implement to an extent closer to the total amount, these affected people would have had some benefits," he told The Daily Star.

According to SANEM's household survey in November-December last year, the poverty rate in Bangladesh increased from 20 percent in 2019 to 42 percent by the end of 2020.

Selim Raihan, also a professor at the economics department of Dhaka University, said a large number of people either lost their jobs or earned less because of the disruption in the labour market. A similar disruption was seen in the urban services sector.

"But the stimulus schemes to help these groups of people could not be fully implemented. As a result, the [unused] money had to be returned. This is something of a big concern," he said.

The government rolled out 23 Covid-19 bailout packages at different times since March last year when the country reported its maiden Covid-19 cases. The combined support now stands at Tk 1,24,053 crore, which is 4.4 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). There are some schemes which will be implemented in the next fiscal year.

Around 65 percent of the total has been disbursed till March, said the progress report.

Among these schemes, 12 packages are designed to provide food and cash support to the poor, special allowances and incentives to healthcare workers and selected farmers.

### PACKAGES FOR THE POOR

One of the 12 packages was free distribution of rice, cash handovers and food for children to the people who became poor all of a sudden in the aftermath of the Covid-19 fallout. The government had allocated Tk 2,500 crore for this purpose, but could spend Tk 1,067 crore last year, according to the PMO progress report.

More than 2.54 crore people and families in 496 upazilas and municipalities got the assistance, mostly food, in April, May and June last year under the package, implemented by the Department of Disaster Management.

The department did not distribute the assistance to the affected people this year yet, said the report.

Good progress was made in the open market sale operation of rice at Tk 10 per kilogram. The food ministry spent almost the entire Tk 770 crore allocated for this package, being implemented among low-income groups in rural and urban areas.

Over 49.49 lakh families in all the unions across the country were beneficiaries of this programme that went on for two months -- April and May -- last year.

On the other hand, 21 lakh families

in all 375 municipalities, 11 city corporations and 53 district town areas had the opportunity to buy the rice at the subsidised price for three months from April to June.

The government faced difficulties in distributing a one-off cash incentive to a selected 50 lakh families last year.

Under the Tk 1,258 crore package, each of 50 lakh families were supposed to get cash support of Tk 2,500. However, only Tk 880 crore was spent.

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

But the distribution of money was stopped midway following allegations of anomalies in the list of beneficiaries with names of solvent people found on it.

Later, the finance division cross-checked all the names, using multilayer scrutiny and databases, and struck 14.32 lakh names off the list.

Finally, the government distributed the incentive among 34,97,353 families.

Speaking about the package, Selim Raihan said it was unfortunate that the government could not achieve the target due to anomalies.

"The loopholes and anomalies in the listing process of the beneficiaries need to be addressed," he said.

The SANEM executive director thinks that a one-off cash support of Tk 2,500 during this crisis is not enough for the affected poor families. "Such cash support should have been given for at least three months."

These 34.97 lakh families will get the same amount of cash assistance this time again under a Tk 930 crore stimulus scheme. Around 1 lakh farmers of 36 districts who suffered loss of the Boro crop due to the nor'wester and heatwave in the first week of April will also get a one-time cash support of Tk 5,000 each under the package.

Selim Raihan said the government has a database of people under its social protection programmes, but it did not have exact data on the "new poor".

He suggested that the government identify the real beneficiaries through a combined effort, engaging stakeholders at different levels, especially the public representatives, NGOs, volunteer organisations, and local administrations in its listing process.

"We should think of saving life and livelihood and reach out to the poor and vulnerable people who need such social protection," he added.

### POOR PROGRESS FOR JOBLESS WORKERS

The government could not make progress in implementing the cash transfer package for the laid-off, disabled, and insolvent workers of export-oriented garment, leather, and footwear manufacturing units.

Of the Tk 1,500 crore scheme announced in September last year, the government could disburse only Tk 5.43 crore as of March, the progress report said.

Some 6,031 workers got the cash benefits although several lakh workers in these sectors have been rendered jobless due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

### HEALTHCARE LESS CARED FOR

The government in July last year set aside an allocation of Tk 100 crore as a special honorarium for doctors, nurses and health workers directly involved in the treatment of Covid-19 patients. But it could spend only Tk 37.38 crore as of this March, the progress report said.

As many as 8,173 health workers -- including 2,320 doctors and 3,554 nurses -- received the honorarium, a one-off amount equivalent to two basic salaries so far, it said.

Officials at the finance ministry blamed a delay on the part of the health ministry in sending a list of recipients for the late disbursement of the funds.

The case was similar when it came to handing compensation to healthcare professionals, members of law enforcement agencies and armed forces, and other government officials and employees and field officers who are on the frontlines risking their lives.

The government allocated Tk 750 crore for this purpose, but it could spend Tk 55 crore as of March, according to the PMO's progress report.

Families of 128 deceased frontliners got the compensation, Tk 1 crore to each, till March, it said.

Finance ministry sources said families of 68 members of police got the compensation -- the highest among all other frontliners. The compensation was also doled out to 13 doctors and 18 nurses, they said.

### ALLOWANCES TO ELDERLY PEOPLE, WIDOWS

The government prepared a new package involving Tk 815 crore to increase the social safety net allowances among the elderly poor, widows, deserted and destitute women of 112 poverty-prone upazilas to 100 percent.

Once started, it will enable around 11 lakh additional beneficiaries to get the allowances.

A significant progress was made in the implementation of another package -- free housing for homeless people. Against an allocation of Tk 2,310 crore, the Department of Disaster Management has built 81,683 houses at a cost of Tk 1,474 crore.

Besides, the government will soon bring elderly poor, widows, deserted and destitute women of 150 other poverty-prone upazilas under its social safety net programme.

### AGRICULTURE SECTOR LAGS BEHIND

The Tk 3,200 crore stimulus package to speed up mechanised farming saw poor progress as the agriculture ministry could spend only Tk 169 crore.

Under the scheme, the government provided 1,240 combine harvesters, 499 reapers and 13 rice transplanters to around 1.50 lakh growers at the upazila level from April to June last year.

The government included an agricultural subsidy in a stimulus package of Tk 9,500 crore in the current fiscal year, giving food security the utmost importance in the wake of the pandemic.

"All the farmers of the country are direct or indirect beneficiaries of the programme," said the progress report.

The agriculture ministry disbursed around Tk 3,559 crore as of March.

SINOPHARM VACCINES

## Air force plane to bring 5 lakh doses today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A transport aircraft of Bangladesh Air Force will bring five lakh doses of Sinopharm Covid-19 vaccine from China today.

A C-130J transport aircraft left for China at 8:12am yesterday to carry the jabs to Bangladesh, according to a press release issued by the Inter Services Public Relations Directorate (ISPR).

Earlier on Monday, Li Jiming, Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh, announced that five lakh doses of the vaccine would arrive in Bangladesh today.

The vaccine doses that the Chinese government has given Bangladesh as gift will be administered to eligible citizens as the first dose, a number of health officials told this newspaper.

Initially, 1,000 people will be given the jabs and then the vaccine will be administered on a mass scale.

Seeking anonymity, a top official at the Directorate General of Health Services said these vaccine doses will allow the authorities to resume administering the first dose that was suspended on April 26 due to a shortage of vaccines.

The Directorate General of Drug Administration recently authorised the emergency use of Sinopharm vaccine.

The vaccine, developed by Beijing Biological Products Institute, a unit of Sinopharm subsidiary China National Biotech Group, has an estimated efficacy of 79% for all age groups. Sinopharm has supplied over 200 million doses at home and abroad.

This is the first Chinese Covid vaccine that has been approved by The World Health Organization.

The vaccine has already been administered to millions of people in China and elsewhere. Apart from China, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Pakistan and several other countries are using it.

## Journo sent to jail in DSA case

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Barishal

A Jhalakathi court yesterday sent a journalist to jail in a case filed under Digital security Act (DSA).

Accused Khalilur Rahman is the Nalcity upazila correspondent of Dainik Janata and he also works for local newspaper Dainik Somoyer Barta.

Police said Khalilur, who is the president of civil society platform Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujan) Nalcity unit, had run for councillor in the recent upazila municipality polls.

After his defeat, he had been making derogatory Facebook comments against incumbent councillor Shahidul Islam.

On May 9, he made a post with derogatory comment against Shahidul and Nalcity Mayor Wahed Khan. Shahidul filed a case against Khalilur under DSA on Monday night, said Ali Ahmmad, officer-in-charge (OC) of Nalcity Police Station.

Hours after the case filing, police arrested Khalilur at Sabujbagh.

Yesterday, he was produced before a court that sent him to jail, the OC added.

Contacted, Khalilur's wife Nargis Akhter Luna said four policemen went to their home around 1:00am yesterday.

"Of them, two were in police uniform... They informed that the councillor filed a robbery case against my husband. Then, they took away my husband," she added.

In his last Facebook post, Khalilur urged the mayor to look into a road repair project for which Tk 50,000 was given to councillor Shahidul.

Meanwhile, Shujan's Barishal district unit secretary Rafiqul Alam demanded Khalilur's immediate release.

The Daily Star could not reach Shahidul for comments. He did not pick up this paper's phone calls.

## Covid death toll crosses 12,000

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh crossed the grim milestone of 12,000 coronavirus fatalities yesterday, nearly 15 months after reporting the first death in March last year.

With 33 more fatalities in 24 hours until yesterday morning, the death toll soared to 12,005.

The country has been seeing less than 60 daily deaths for a week after recording over 100 deaths on several occasions last month.

However, the mortality rate rose to 1.55 percent yesterday after staying at 1.54 for four days, according to a handout of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

Besides, 1,230 new cases were detected after testing of 14,184 samples, pushing up the caseload to 776,257. Bangladesh has so far carried out 5,661,926 tests.

The daily infection rate fell slightly to 8.67 percent yesterday from Monday's 8.99 percent.

After a massive upsurge in April, the number of daily cases fell below 2,000 since May 1.

The number of tests, as well as new cases, has declined from May 4, according to corona.gov.bd.

The DGHS said 3,044 patients recovered in the 24-hour period, taking the recovery rate to 92.15 percent.

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

## Eid is here, joy is not

FROM PAGE 1

of moon in the farthest corner of the sky. No shouts, no fireworks, no honking of horns and no preparations for celebration.

Outside, it will remain quiet; eerily quiet all around. And inside, it will be just another day for human zombies, swinging to the situation that has persisted for the last 14 months amid restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic, which has already claimed more than 12,000 lives at home and over 33.2 lakh beyond.

Eid has a tremendous influence on our lives, economy and culture, so much so that everything would invariably revolve around the occasion. The three shots from the two Eids and Pahela Baishakh keep the domestic businesses going for a whole year.

Sadly, it is now on a sickbed, missing out on two back-to-back shots from Pahela Baishakh and this Eid. It is a repeat of last year's events. Businesses are ailing, so are we. Eid is here, yet a sense of huge emptiness engulfs each of us. Happiness, where has it gone?

Have we seen happy faces this time? Ahead of every Eid, the faces that make a beeline for homes, finding a place for oneself on any vehicle that moves,

braving any situation that reminds us of hell and savouring every sight on the way.

Caught in a 50-km long tailback, they smile. Made to walk for 10 kilometres while going out of Dhaka, they smile. Kept waiting at