

## Positive tests ominously high

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over the past 24 hours were put at 281,386 by the health ministry yesterday, dropping below 300,000 for the first time since April 21. The daily death count stood at 4,106.

At the current rate India's total caseload since the epidemic struck a year ago should pass the 25 million mark in the next couple of days. Total deaths were put at 274,390.

Hospitals have had to turn patients away while mortuaries and crematoriums have been unable to cope with bodies piling up.

Photographs and television images of funeral pyres burning in parking lots and corpses washing up on the banks of the Ganges river have fuelled impatience with the government's handling of the crisis.

It is widely accepted that the official figures grossly underestimate the real impact of the epidemic, with some experts saying actual infections and deaths could be five to 10 times higher.

### 'ILLUSION'

Whereas the first wave of the epidemic in India, which peaked in September, was largely concentrated in urban areas, where testing was introduced faster, the second wave that erupted in February is rampaging through rural towns and villages, where about two-thirds of the country's 1.35 billion people live, and testing in those places is very patchy.

"This drop in confirmed Covid cases in India is an illusion," S. Vincent Rajkumar, a professor of medicine at the Mayo Clinic in the United States, said on Twitter.

"First, due to limited testing,

the total number of cases is a huge underestimate. Second, confirmed cases can only occur where you can confirm: the urban areas. Rural areas are not getting counted."

A cyclone on course to hit the coast of Gujarat yesterday was expected to disrupt both testing and vaccination efforts in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state, where infections have risen 30% since May 2.

While lockdowns have helped limit cases in parts of the country hit during an initial surge of infections in February and April, such as Maharashtra and Delhi, rural areas and some states are dealing with fresh surges.

The government issued detailed guidelines on Sunday for monitoring Covid-19 cases, with the health ministry asking villages to look out for people with flu-like illness and get them tested for Covid-19.

Modi has come under fire for his messaging to the public, a decision to leave key decisions on lockdowns to states, and the slow rollout of an immunisation campaign in the world's biggest vaccine producer.

India has fully vaccinated just over 40.4 million people, or 2.9% of its population.

A top virologist told Reuters on Sunday that he had resigned from a forum of scientific advisers set up by the government to detect variants of the coronavirus.

Shahid Jameel, chair of the scientific advisory group of the forum known as INSACOG, declined to say why he had resigned but said he was concerned that authorities were not paying enough attention to the evidence as they set policy.

## Pakistan seeks UN aid

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Army and the commanding officer of the Mukti Fouz would be designated as commander-in-chief. The decision was reported to have been taken by the Bangladesh government recently. The government also decided to reorganise the Bangladesh Army.

### PAKISTAN, IN A SHIFT, ASKS UN FOR AID

Pakistan asked the United Nations for food and coastal steamers to distribute relief supplies in East Pakistan. At the same time, Pakistani authorities disclosed that the government had invited United Nations experts and foreign specialists to return and resume their work June 1.

The government's decision to accept assistance was made known here by Muzaffar M Ahmad, economic adviser to President Yahya Khan, after the adviser and other Pakistani officials had met with Secretary UN General Thant.

The Pakistani president last week replied to Thant's April 22 offer of aid by saying food supplies were believed to be adequate and outside help was not needed, but that the situation was being reviewed.

Muzaffar M Ahmad estimated that 30 coastal vessels were needed for relief activity and that requests were being made to a number of governments. Presumably, United Nations assistance was being sought in helping to obtain the needed vessels.

### SOVIET AID OFFER

The Soviet Union offered today a free gift of 50,000 tonnes of rice to the Government of India to help relieve the burden of feeding the large number of refugees from Bangladesh.

### BRAHMANBARIA TOWN RAZED TO THE GROUND

Two medical missionaries belonging to the New Zealand Baptist Church said today in Agartala that the entire Brahmanbaria town had been virtually wiped out by the Pakistan army. They told the journalists that the army also looted the town before destroying it. The missionaries, both trained nurses, said they left the town after it was strafed by five Pakistani fighter planes. A shell also hit their residence.

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## Long working hours

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Climate Change and Health.

"What we want to do with this information is promote more action, more protection of workers," she said.

The joint study, produced by the WHO and the International Labour Organization, showed that most victims (72%) were men and were middle-aged or older. Often, the deaths occurred much later in life, sometimes decades later, than the shifts worked.

It also showed that people living in Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific region - a WHO-defined region which includes China, Japan and Australia -- were the most affected.

Overall, the study - drawing on data from 194 countries - said that working 55 hours or more a week is associated with a 35% higher risk of stroke and a 17% higher risk of dying from ischemic heart disease compared with a 35-40 hour working week.

The study covered the period

2000-2016, and so did not include the Covid-19 pandemic, but WHO officials said the surge in remote working and the global economic slowdown resulting from the coronavirus emergency may have increased the risks.

"The pandemic is accelerating developments that could feed the trend towards increased working time," the WHO said, estimating that at least 9% of people work long hours.

WHO staff, including its chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, say they have been working long hours during the pandemic and Neira said the UN agency would seek to improve its policy in light of the study.

Capping hours would be beneficial for employers since that has been shown to increase worker productivity, WHO technical officer Frank Pega said.

"It's really a smart choice not to increase long working hours in an economic crisis."

## Civilian killings in DR Congo blamed on notorious militia

AFP, Bunia

At least 10 civilians were killed in the Democratic Republic of Congo's restive east this week, a local administrator and a rights group said, blaming the violence on the ADF militia.

The killings happened "on Wednesday, May 12, in the villages of Ngaka and Mangundu" in Ituri province, the Kivu Security Tracker group posted on Twitter.

"Local sources suspect the ADF, possibly in coalition with a local group," the KST added.

Idriss Koma Kukodila, the administrator of the Mambasa territory where the attacks took place, told AFP that "young people found 15 decomposing bodies near Ngaka village on Saturday."

"They appear to have been killed in attacks on Thursday and Friday in the village, as well as in neighbouring Lukaya and Makumo," Koma added, saying the Red Cross had buried the remains.

He blamed the ADF for the

killings, which took place a few kilometres north of the fighters' usual haunts around the city of Beni in neighbouring North Kivu province.

Citing local civil society sources, UN-run Okapi radio put the toll at 21 since the beginning of last week, with the ADF taking around 50 hostages.

"The military presence in the Mambasa region is weak, and the attackers are capitalising on that," Koma said, calling for reinforcements and voicing alarm about people fleeing the violence.

A historically Ugandan Islamist group, the ADF is the bloodiest of scores of armed militias that roam the eastern DRC, many of them a legacy of two regional wars in the 1990s.

Violence in North Kivu and Ituri prompted the government in Kinshasa to declare a "state of siege" in the two provinces, placing them under military rule from last week.

Linked to the so-called Islamic State (IS) group according to Washington, the KST says the ADF has killed more than 1,200 civilians in the Beni area alone since 2017.



PHOTO: REUTERS

A police officer inspects a car at a checkpoint as travellers return to the capital city after the Eid al-Fitr festival, amid the coronavirus disease pandemic, in Cikarang, Bekasi, on the outskirts of Jakarta, Indonesia yesterday.

## UGC irked as ministry keeps mum

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addition to these four.

### NO ACTION AFTER PROBES

In October last year, the UGC submitted a probe report to the education ministry and the Prime Minister's Office after finding evidence of corruption and irregularities by the RU VC and pro-VC in appointing teachers at the university.

In the probe report, the commission recommended taking action against VC Prof M Abdus Sobhan, pro-VC Prof Choudhury M Zakaria and others of the university over the matter. It also recommended scrapping the appointment of 34 teachers, who were recruited "relaxing university rules".

The report said the vice-chancellor, in collusion with others, also relaxed the rules to appoint his daughter and son-in-law as two of these 34 teachers at the public university.

In December, the ministry halted all kinds of appointments at RU, asking Sobhan to explain in seven working days why the appointments were being made to a number of governments. Presumably, United Nations assistance was being sought in helping to obtain the needed vessels.

The education ministry, in a separate order, asked the VC to take necessary steps to remove Prof Abdul Bari from the post of university registrar for not properly assisting a UGC committee in probing allegations of irregularities at RU.

"In December, Bari resigned from his post. But since then, no visible punishment against the VC and the others has been seen," said a member of the commission.

Against this backdrop, on May 6, Abdus Sobhan appointed 137 teachers and staffers on his last day in office showing complete disregard for the ministerial embargo on making any appointments.

The UGC probe, in its investigation at RU, found evidence of 25 kinds of irregularities and corruption done by top members of the university administration.

The report said RU VC Prof Sobhan occupied a duplex of the university for 18 months showing various excuses. It recommended collecting Tk 5.61 lakh in rent from the VC for the house.

In October last year, Sobhan held a press conference where he raised questions over the neutrality of the probe body and termed it "one-sided and biased".

Sobhan said all the allegations against him were "silly, false and fabricated". He alleged that a section of people was trying to replace him and tarnish the image of the university and the government.

In its report submitted to the education ministry on February 25 this year, a UGC probe committee also recommended taking measures against Begum Rokeya University VC Prof Nazmul Ahsan Kalimullah. It found irregularities in the construction of two 10-storey buildings on the

university campus in Rangpur.

The prime minister inaugurated construction of the Sheikh Hasina Female Student Dormitory and Dr Wazed Research and Training Institute on the campus via a virtual conference on January 4, 2017.

The research institute's initial cost was Tk 26.87 crore, but the budget increased to Tk 61 crore. Around Tk 51.35 crore was allocated to construct the dormitory, but the cost doubled to Tk 107 crore, found the probe body.

Also mentioned in the report was that around Tk 40 lakh was spent as consultancy fees, although there was no allocation in this regard in the original development project proposal.

In a press conference in Dhaka on March 4, Kalimullah rejected all findings of the UGC report on his reported irregularities, saying it was biased and fabricated.

"I state without any hesitation that Education Minister Dipu Moni, for her personal animosity towards me, forced UGC into preparing the fabricated and biased report," he said.

The education ministry denounced Kalimullah's statement, terming it fabricated and baseless. UGC said it conducted an impartial investigation without anyone's influence while probing corruption allegations against him.

"Another UGC probe team is now investigating 45 allegations against Kalimullah. We are hoping that the probe team will submit the report to the education ministry soon," said a UGC member.

Among these 45 allegations, some notable ones are the VC's absence at campus; corruption, anomalies and violating UGC's guidelines centring workforce recruitment; discrimination in promoting officials; unauthorised occupation of several administrative posts; and irregularities in purchases.

At Noakhali Science and Technology University, a top ministry official in the secondary and higher education division said that in April 2019, the ministry prohibited recruitment of teachers and staff following allegations of irregularities and corruption against then VC Wahiduzzaman.

The source said the UGC probe team recently submitted their report on this.

"After seeing the report, I came to know he [Wahiduzzaman] had bought a car at the cost of Tk 1.44 crore, although there was allocation of Tk 90 lakh for that.

"He [Wahiduzzaman] was involved in irregularities in opening new subjects. He was interested in opening other subjects than natural sciences, it was fishy," the source added.

Contacted, Wahiduzzaman said that the allegations filed against him were false and most of the signatures of the complainants were fake. He

said that he bought the car at a cost of Tk 1.44 crore keeping in mind the safety of riders and longevity and that the car is now at the university.

The former VC added that he opened all subjects following due procedure and with the approval of UGC.

Asked about what steps the UGC recommends after such probes, a UGC member said that they do not usually specify the nature of steps to be taken by universities.

Generally, they recommend that those found to be responsible for such irregularities cannot be allowed to run the university any longer, the UGC member added.

In one case, however, the commission recommended a VC's removal.

In September 2019, a UGC probe committee found evidence of irregularities and corruption against Khondoker Md Nasiruddin, then vice-chancellor of Bangladesh Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University, and recommended his withdrawal.

"We had recommended taking legal action against Khondoker Nasiruddin for his involvement in irregularities and corruption in student admission, appointment of teachers, and procurement," a member of the probe committee told The Daily Star.

Nasiruddin resigned from his post on September 30, 2019 but has so far not faced any action for the irregularities and corruption he was found guilty of by the UGC.

Despite repeated attempts, this correspondent could not reach Nasiruddin for comment.

"A LENGTHY PROCESS" Contacted, Deputy Education Minister Mohibul Hassan Chowdhury said that they are taking steps against those found guilty of irregularities.

"If the allegations were proved, we will take actions against even those who have completed their tenures."

"We have embargoed appointments at several universities. We are taking specific actions against specific allegations. If we find financial irregularities and misappropriations, we will send the allegations to the Anti-Corruption Commission," he said.

Mohibul said when the ministry wants to take steps regarding irregularities of appointment, they need to go through "a lengthy process". "It takes time, as we need to hear arguments from both sides," he added.

According to UGC statistics, there are 49 public universities in the country with around three lakh students, except those at National University, Islamic University, and Bangladesh Open University. Around 15,000 teachers work at these public institutions.

## Babul sent to jail

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(prosecution) of Chattogram Metropolitan Police.

The magistrate then sent him to jail. "We will appeal for his bail," Babul's lawyer Arifur Rahman said.

His wife Mitu's father Mosharraf Hossain accused him in a murder case filed with Panchlaish Police Station last Wednesday.

Babul was arrested the same day, said PBI Inspector Santosh Kumar Chakma, who is investigating the case.

Babul was summoned to Chattogram PBI office last Tuesday. Officers said he could not give satisfactory answers to several questions asked by the detectives.

Babul is suspected of being the mastermind of the murder and he spent Tk 3 lakh to hire the hitmen through police informant Kamrul Islam Musa, they added.

Chattogram Jail Authority has arranged special security for Babul in prison. Several Islamist militants, including Neo-JMB members, arrested by Babul when he was in the police force, are still in jail, officials said.

## Income per capita

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and it took a decade to double to \$240 in 1982. It increased by just \$80 to \$320 in the next decade till 1992.

## New Covid cases

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safety guidelines are strictly maintained.

After testing 26 people, the IEDCR has so far detected the presence of new variant, which devastated India, in six India returnees.

All of the Covid-19 patients, aged between seven to 75, with the variant have travelled to and from India between April 1 and 25.

With the new cases, the total number of confirmed Covid-19 cases reached 7,80,857.

"As people left and returned to Dhaka for Eid, we will see the impact a few days later. As the Indian variant is here, the transmission may soon rise again," Dr Mushtaq Hussain, consultant of the IEDCR told The Daily Star.

Yesterday, the number of Covid-19 deaths had also risen.

In the same 24 hours yesterday, a total of 32 Covid-19 patients died -- up from 25 on Sunday.

With this, the total number of deaths reached 12,181 and the death rate stands at 1.56 percent.

The positivity rate was 6.75 percent against a total of 10,347 tests yesterday.

Meanwhile, a total of 1,058 Covid-19 patients have recovered in this period, raising the recovery rate to 92.60 percent.

Among the 32 deceased, 23 were males and nine females.

One was aged between 21 and 30 years, three between 31 and 40, four between 41 and 50, seven between 51 and 60 and 17 were above 60 years.

## War criminal's

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criminals of the locality always misbehaved with us and humiliated Biranganas, including my mother, time and again," he said.

Md Shamsul Alam, officer-in-charge of Shalla Police Station, said, "We've started investigating the matter after receiving the complaint and legal action will be taken against the accused soon."

On December 4, 1971, a mass killing and torture spree took place at Perua-Shyamarchar area in Derai and Shalla upazila.

In 2016, Freedom Fighter Rajani Kanta Das filed a case with International War Crimes Tribunal.

In 2018, six Biranganas of Derai and Shalla upazilas were acknowledged by the government and they were listed as key witnesses in the case.

Later that year, five accused war criminals, including Abdul Jalil, were arrested.

Since then, the Biranganas have often been humiliated and intimidated by accused war criminals' relatives.

The Daily Star on April 8, 2019, published the report "Humiliated, six Biranganas living in fear".

After this report, and many other reports in local dailies, they got government support of different kinds but their safety was not properly ensured.

Contacted, Md Al-muktadir Hossain, upazila nirbahi officer of Shalla, said, "The Biranganas and all other witnesses of the case filed in the war crimes tribunal are facing security threats. We're planning to relocate them to a safer location, where they can stay united and we can ensure their safety."

## Graft case for South Africa's Zuma delayed to May 26

AFP, Pietermaritzburg

The start of the corruption trial of South Africa's scandal-tainted ex-president Jacob Zuma, which was slated to start yesterday, has been postponed to May 26, a judge said.

Zuma is facing 16 charges of fraud, graft and racketeering relating to a 1999 purchase of fighter jets, patrol boats and military gear from five European arms firms for 30 billion rand, then the equivalent of nearly \$5.0 billion.