

BANGLADESH UPDATE

1,272
New cases in 24hrs

7,82,129
Total cases

12,221
Deaths

7,24,209
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

3,412,496
Deaths

164,690,323
Total cases

Govt won't take advice harmful for country: PM

Bss, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said her government would not take any advice that would cause damage to the country.

"Once upon a time, the state was run with advice [from others]. But I don't do so. My word is -- the country is mine and I know it better how we will develop the country. We will take advice, but it will not cause any damage to the country," she said.

Speaking at a meeting of the National Economic Council (NEC) virtually from the Gono Bhaban, Hasina said the World Bank had earlier advised (a previous BNP government) to stop operation of the railway and BRTC buses which are massively used by the masses.

In line with the advice, a plan was adopted to close down the railway across the country for which an agreement was signed at that time, the PM said.

Hasina said her government, after assuming office, had decided to reopen the railway for the welfare of the people.

She said she had set up a separate ministry and provided necessary allocation for it in the budget just for the reopening of the railway.

"We keep everything [railway and BRTC buses] open and the people are now getting its benefits which is the biggest thing."

The premier said no country could be developed unless its communication, power and roads were developed. She said her government has been working tirelessly for the development of water, rail and airways alongside the road to ensure the overall development of the country.

She appreciated the government officials for carrying out nation building activities as they were considering the tasks as their own and performing their duties accordingly.

Stating that the government is going to place the national budget for 2021-22 fiscal year in parliament on June 3, Hasina lauded the officials for their hard work in preparing projects which were being taken up under the Annual Development Programme (ADP) or placed for approval.

She asked officials to make necessary amendments to the projects if required.

The PM's cabinet colleagues and officials concerned attended the meeting from the NEC conference room and Cabinet Division through videoconferencing.

Carnival of graft in time of Covid

FROM PAGE 1

Besides, allegations of misuse of funds meant for the quarantine and food for frontline healthcare professionals in public hospitals led the government to put such facilities on hold.

Last month, the allegation of financial corruption involving the much-awaited appointment of 2,500 medical technologists in public hospitals surfaced in the ill-equipped health sector.

In response to the fake test certificate scam, the health ministry only removed several top DGHS officials, including the then director general.

But ministry officials, who were also allegedly involved in the irregularities, remained untouched while the then health secretary Asadul Islam was promoted as a senior secretary to another ministry.

Last September, a DGHS driver named Abdul Malek drew huge media attention with investigators revealing that he has wealth valued at no less than Tk 1,000 crore. He landed in jail but no progress has been seen in the case since. **LONG-RUNNING SYNDICATE** Experts said the corruption in the health sector is a result of a long-running syndicate involving officials of the health ministry, from top to bottom.

"There is a systemic problem in the health sector for which a well-organised syndicate is taking the chance each time," Prof Dr Nasrin Sultana, director of the Institute of Health Economics at Dhaka University, told The Daily Star yesterday.

"The syndicate is rooted even inside the policymakers."

Amid controversies over the purchase of substandard PPE and N95 masks, Brig Gen Md Shahidullah, director of Central Medical Stores Depot (CMSD), was taken back to army headquarters on May 23 last year.

Before leaving charge as director, Shahidullah wrote to the public administration ministry on May 30 last year alleging that a syndicate with administrative and political clout control purchases in the health sector. He died of Covid in July last year.

One lakh Pfizer shots to arrive

FROM PAGE 1

the export of vaccines because of its high demand amid severe Covid-19 infections.

Canadian Procurement Minister Anita Anand recently said Canada might distribute excess stockpiles of the AstraZeneca vaccine among the developing countries.

Momen urged the envoy to pursue with his government for at least two million doses so that Bangladesh receives those directly, not through the COVAX facility of the World Health Organization.

He also proposed that Canada may help vaccinate the Rohingyas in Bangladesh separately.

Bangladesh is also trying to acquire vaccines from some other countries, including China, Russia, and the US.

In response, the Canadian high commissioner assured the minister of following up the request with his government.

High Commissioner Préfontaine also stated that Canada would continue its humanitarian support for displaced Rohingyas and host communities at the same scale for the next three years, as was reflected in their budgetary framework for the next three years.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh has also requested India to supply the AstraZeneca vaccine as the stock of available vaccine will run out soon, affecting the inoculation campaign in the country.

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen made the request during a phone call with Indian Foreign Minister S Jaishankar yesterday.

The telephone conversation was held when Bangladesh sent medicine, injections, and other medical supplies worth Tk 20 crore to India through

Benapole land port as assistance during the country's devastating Covid-19 situation.

Toufique Hasan, Bangladesh's deputy high commissioner in Kolkata, handed over the supplies to the Indian Red Crescent Society.

This was the second consignment of medical assistance from Bangladesh. On May 6, Bangladesh provided over 10,000 vials of Remdesivir injections to India.

Under an agreement among the Bangladesh government, Beximco Pharmaceuticals Ltd, and Serum Institute of India, Bangladesh received 10.2 million vaccines of 30 million doses. Amid severe Covid-19 infections and deaths, India has been halting exports of vaccines since March.

In response to Momen's request, Jaishankar said he is aware of the situation in Bangladesh and the demand for AstraZeneca vaccines.

Foreign Minister Momen said as India could not supply the vaccine in time, Bangladesh has requested the US to supply it immediately.

He also told his Indian counterpart that he may request the US to supply vaccines to Bangladesh. Jaishankar said he would make the request to the US.

In another development, at least 1,014 Bangladeshi expatriate professionals, including doctors, engineers, and professors -- led by Dr AFM Haque -- have written an application to the White House requesting a supply of vaccines to Bangladesh.

Besides, Georgia State Senator Sheikh Rahman, Bangabandhu Foundation US Branch, and Muktiyoddha Council there also requested the White House for sending vaccines to Bangladesh.



Explosions light-up the night sky above buildings in Gaza City as Israeli forces shell the Palestinian enclave early yesterday. Israeli jets kept up a barrage of air strikes against the Palestinian enclave of Gaza.

PHOTO: AFP

Rozina sent to jail, hearing on bail tomorrow

FROM PAGE 1

She was kept confined at the health ministry for more than five hours on Monday before being handed over to police. At that time, she was inside the secretariat to gather news.

Her confinement and arrest both triggered protests by journalists all over the country.

She was manhandled by ministry officials and staffers. She had fallen ill and instead of being taken to hospital, she was taken to Shahbagh Police Station.

Police said Shibbir Ahmed Osmani, a deputy secretary of the health services division, filed a case against Rozina, after which she was arrested.

In the case statement, Shibbir said Bangladesh is now in negotiations with several countries for purchasing Covid-19 vaccines and some of those include "non-disclosure agreements".

He alleged Rozina was secretly taking photos of the documents.

Rozina's sister Sabina Parvin told reporters at Shahbagh Police Station on Monday night that her sister went to the ministry for professional purposes and received some documents from her sources there.

"She was harassed there and her bag was snatched away. Some papers might have been put in her bag while she was kept in confinement," said Sabina.

Meanwhile, Health Minister Zahid Maleque claimed she was not physically tortured and said his ministry would take action against anyone involved in wrongdoings.

Journalists continued their protest near the police station overnight before they were driven away around 4:00am yesterday.

As the day progressed, protests spread across the country, while a group of journalists in Dhaka boycotted a press briefing held by the health ministry over the issue. Some reporters even went to Shahbagh Police Station

to embrace voluntary imprisonment.

While journalist's associations in different districts held demonstrations, different local and international social, political and rights organisations demanded the immediate release of the Rozina and the withdrawal of the case.

ROZINA IN THE DOCK Rozina was taken to Dhaka's Chief Metropolitan Magistrate (CMM) Court around 8:00am yesterday, where she kept inside lockup for three hours before the court started the case proceedings.

In his forwarding, Inspector Arifur Rahman Sardar, also the investigation officer of the case, sought a five-day remand "to unveil the mystery of the case".

Rozina was produced before the court around 11:00am amid tight security.

Her lawyer filed a petition seeking bail and another petition for the cancellation of the remand prayer.

But the prosecution opposed her bail prayer, saying that she may "flee forever".

During the hearing, defence counsel Ehsanul Haque Shomaji said the seizure list presented to the court showed that the documents were not taken from Rozina, but a government official himself presented those.

"The allegations were defamatory and offensive," he added.

The lawyer further said his client went to the secretariat to discharge her professional duties.

She wrote several reports on corruption and mismanagement of the health ministry and she is a victim of the situation for performing her duty, he added.

"I'M BEING WRONGED FOR MY REPORTS": ROZINA

Rozina said she was wronged.

She made this comment in the presence of some journalists while being taken to the jail.

"I'm being wronged for my reports on health ministry," Rozina, escorted by police, said when one of the journalists asked if she had anything to say.

Law enforcers, while taking her away, were then heard saying that she is not allowed to speak to the media.

She was sent to Kashimpur Women's Central Jail in Gazipur.

The court said Rozina will get treatment according to the jail code after her lawyer filed a petition seeking her treatment.

Meanwhile, talking to reporters on the court premises yesterday, Rozina's husband Monirul Islam Mithu said, "Those who tortured, assaulted and confined her [Rozina] will be sued."

"Everyone has the video footage of Rozina being tortured," he said.

MINISTRY'S PROBE BODY

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare yesterday formed a three-member probe committee to look into the confinement and handover to police of journalist Rozina Islam at the Secretariat on Monday.

Joint Secretary (development) Saifullah Hil Ajam was made the convener of the committee, which has been ordered to submit a report within three working days, the ministry said in a statement yesterday.

It also said if any official was found involved in wrongdoings during the probe, legal action would be taken against them.

Rozina Islam, a journalist known for her strong reporting on official corruption was shown arrested yesterday on charges of violating the Official Secrets Act.

The journalist rejected all allegations against her and said she had been harassed inside the Secretariat.

Rozina Islam was taken to Kashimpur Central Women's Jail on Tuesday afternoon after a Dhaka court rejected police's remand plea.

Why should she be in jail for 3 days?

FROM PAGE 1

The Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898 (Act no. V of 1898) clearly states in section 497. (1) "When any person accused of any non-bailable offence is arrested or detained without warrant... is brought before a court, he may be released on bail but he shall not be so released if there appears to be reasonable grounds for believing that he has been guilty of an offence punishable with death or transportation for life.

Provided that the court may direct any person under the age of sixteen years or any woman or any sick or infirm person accused of such an offence be released on bail."

First as a citizen, then as a woman and finally as someone sick, Rozina is entitled to bail. With due respect to the learned judge, we repeat, we hold the judiciary in the highest esteem, would we be wrong to ask as to how the provision of 497 was followed in Rozina's case?

According to Barrister Tanjibul Alam, "The right of a woman to seek bail even if accused of a non-bailable offence is provided in section 497 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. There are a number of judicial decisions of the Appellate Division as well as the High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh and India that a person is entitled to bail if he is not likely to abscond, destroy evidence or intimidate witnesses."

The law could not have been clearer. Yet with all weight of the law on her side, Rozina had to face foot-dragging over her bail. Again, we do not question the learned judge but sincerely plead that we, the law-abiding citizens, stand totally confused as to how we should understand the law and seek justice.

Rozina Islam has been charged under section 79 and 411 of the Penal Code of 1860, and section 3 and 5 of the Official Secrets Act of 1923.

The provisions of the Penal Code deals with theft. What did Rozina steal? She is accused of having taken

some snapshots by her mobile phone which is now in the possession of police. Whatever she did, she did so while on duty as a professional journalist and in public interest. There was nothing personal in this matter, it was only journalistic and hence in public interest.

Section 3 of the Official Secrets Act refers to "spying" which happens only when information is collected and passed on to an "enemy" country.

Nothing like that happened here. Section 5 talks about "wrongful communication by officials" and entering "prohibited place". Again the room of PS to the secretary is "not a prohibited" place and there has been no "wrongful communication". In fact there has not been any communication at all except the harassment of Rozina.

We would like to state forcefully that the Official Secrets Act of 1923 is one of the most anti-freedom and controversial laws that exist in our statute books. This law clashes with the fundamental principles of our constitution that guarantees freedom of expression subject to reasonable restrictions under Article 39. It directly contradicts the Right to Information (RTI) Act which clearly states that the RTI will take precedence over other laws that contradict its provisions. It means that as long as the RTI exists the Official Secrets Act should stand superseded by the RTI.

Journalists in Bangladesh have long struggled against this law and we consider it to be a law that encourages non-transparency and lack of accountability and as such corruption, nepotism and waste of public money.

Here are two examples of Rozina's several recent reports on corruption within the health ministry. On May 18, she published a two-part report titled "You will get Tk 1 crore now, and more later". This was a story of recruiting 1,800 employees in the ministry. Two members of the recruitment committee made a written complaint to the secretary of health services of

the health ministry that Tk 15-20 lakh were taken from some candidates with the promise of passing them in the written test. This was revealed to the selection committee when candidates, during oral examination, could not answer questions in which they got 60 to 70 percent marks in the written examination.

Her second story titled "Irregularities involving Tk 350 crore for emergency purchases" revealed that medical equipment and health safety items were purchased from parties without any agreement, and other irregularities about which the director of Central Medical Stores Depot made a written complaint on February 9 this year.

It is a natural question as to who benefitted from such bold investigative journalism of Rozina Islam. We think there cannot be any doubt that the taxpayers benefitted, with whose hard-earned money such corruption takes place. Theoretically, a government, committed to good governance and judicious use of public money, should also be immensely benefitted.

Whatever Rozina did benefitted the public and the government. It is obvious that the documents that benefitted the public and the government's accountability process were not voluntarily given by government officials to Rozina. She got it somehow but her action was meant for public benefit. There was nothing personal in what Rozina did and the benefit for all her actions have been to the tax-paying public.

We urge the judiciary, the government and all others to consider that this was journalism meant for public service and without such investigative journalism our country will be mired in more corruption and misuse of our scarce resource. Such journalism is always necessary for any society to thrive, but it is more necessary in this time of pandemic triggered economic, social and more appropriately existential crisis.

Over 50 missing after boat from Libya sinks

33 others from Bangladesh rescued

AFP, Tunis

More than 50 people were missing yesterday when their boat sank after leaving Libya heading to Europe, Tunisia's defence ministry said, with 33 others rescued.

Defence ministry spokesman Mohamed Zikri said the survivors of the shipwreck were picked up after clinging to an oil platform off the southern coast of Tunisia.

"There are 33 survivors, all apparently from Bangladesh," Flavio Di Giacomo, a spokesman for the International Organization for Migration, told AFP. "At least 50 are missing."

Diplomacy

FROM PAGE 1

Israeli air strikes have killed 213 Palestinians, including 61 children, and wounded more than 1,400 people in Gaza, according to the Gaza health ministry.

Palestinian militants have fired around 3,350 rockets toward Israel that have killed 10 people, including a child, Israeli authorities said.

Two Thai workers were killed yesterday and seven people were wounded in a rocket strike on an Israeli farm just over the Gaza border, police said. Hamas and Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility.

The Security Council session, the fourth since the conflict escalated, was called after the United States, a key Israel ally, blocked adoption of a joint statement calling for a halt to the violence on Monday for the third time in a week.

US President Joe Biden, having resisted joining other world leaders and much of his own Democratic party in calling for an immediate end to hostilities, told Netanyahu Monday night he backs a ceasefire, but stopped short of demanding a truce.

The Israeli army yesterday said it had struck dozens of "targets" inside Gaza since midnight, while Palestinian militants had fired 70 rockets, dozens of which were intercepted by air defences. "They destroyed our house but I don't know why they targeted us," said Nazmi al-Dalhouth, 70, of western Gaza City, adding he was now homeless after "a terrifying, violent night".

Gaza resident Roba Abu al-Awf, 20, said she expected a rough night.

"We have nothing to do but sit at home," she said. "Death could come at any moment -- the bombing is crazy and indiscriminate."

A strike late Monday knocked out Gaza's only Covid-19 testing laboratory, the health ministry said. The Qatari Red Crescent said a strike damaged one of its offices in the enclave.

The rate of positive coronavirus tests in Gaza has been among the highest in the world, at 28 percent.

Hospitals in the poverty-stricken territory, which has been under Israeli blockade for almost 15 years, have been overwhelmed by patients.

Israeli fire has cratered roads and battered crucial infrastructure, causing blackouts and prompting the electricity authority to warn Monday it only had enough fuel left to provide power for another two to three days.

Reuters reported a brief lull in fighting after early yesterday's bombardments on the tiny strip. The UN said it was able to send a small fuel convoy into the enclave, where it says 52,000 people are now displaced. It had to stop the operations after fighting resumed.

Nearly 450 buildings in the Gaza strip have been destroyed or badly damaged, including six hospitals and nine primary care health centres, the United Nations humanitarian agency said. Some 47,000 of the 52,000 displaced had fled to UN schools.

Fighter jets hit what the Israeli military dubs the "metro", its term for Hamas's underground tunnels, which Israel has previously acknowledged run in part through civilian areas.

Rockets have meanwhile also been fired at Israel from Lebanon, where protests against Israel's Gaza campaign have been held in the border area. The Israeli army said the six rockets did not reach its territory.

Editors' Council

FROM PAGE 1

mentality of the authorities for muzzling the voice of the press."

This threatens independent journalism, and freedom of expression in the future, and also attempts to erode the independence of the press, the statement added.

"In a democratic society, deplorable attempts like this threatens the very existence of newspapers, and pose challenges for the profession," read the statement, signed by Sampadak Parishad President Mahfuz Anam and Secretary General Naem Nizam.

The platform of editors said this unprecedented incident would remain as a black episode in the history of Bangladesh's journalism.

"Detaining Rozina Islam for six hours to a room at the health ministry, and then harassing her in various ways is not just saddening, actions must be taken against those involved in the incident. An independent enquiry must be conducted to find out under which law a journalist was detained in this way. Actions have to be taken against those to be found guilty," said the statement.

The Parishad also demanded immediate release of Rozina.