

BANGLADESH UPDATE



1,028
New cases in 24hrs



7,87,726
Total cases



12,348
Deaths



7,29,798
Recoveries



GLOBAL UPDATE

3,463,611
Deaths



166,805,114
Total cases

Take up fish farming

Hasina urges the youth

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday urged the young people to take up fish farming as profession.

"There is a huge opportunity of employment in the sector and this should be utilised," she said in a pre-recorded video message marking the 18th founding anniversary of Awami Matsyajibi League.

The PM said the government has taken measures to improve fish production through expansion of pisciculture and research.

Reiterating her government's goal of making Bangladesh economically self-sufficient, Hasina said the country will move forward following the ideals and principles of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

"On the 50th anniversary of our independence and birth centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, our pledge will be to make the country developed and prosperous.

"We will build Golden Bangladesh of the Father of the Nation," she said.

The PM said the government is providing training to youths on fish farming so that they can make the country more advanced in fish



production.

She said Karmasangsthan Bank is providing collateral-free loan to youths so that they can stand on their own feet.

Hasina said instead of running after office jobs on completion of studies, the educated young people can engage in fish production for their livelihood.

The government is setting up 100 economic zones where food processing industries can be set up to create opportunities for marketing, she added.

The premier asked Matsyajibi League leaders to strengthen its organisational capacity to supplement the government's efforts to increase fish production.

She said the per capita fish consumption in the country is now 62 grams.

The citizens of the country no longer suffer from malnutrition due to the government's initiative to ensure nutrition, the PM said.

Hasina said to increase fish production further, which is now around 50 lakh tonnes a year, the government is renovating ponds, and excavating canals, lakes and rivers.

She also said the government has taken special measures to improve hilsa production in which Bangladesh is number one now.



Mangoes, arguably the most popular fruit in Bangladesh, have hit the markets as the country reels under the heat wave. The photo was taken in the capital's Gulistan yesterday.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

'Rozina in jail as she exposed graft'

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Convener of Nagorik Oikya Mahmudur Rahman Manna, former Ducus VP Nurul Haque Nur, and member of Rashtrachinta Advocate Hasnat Quaiyum also spoke at the rally.

Meanwhile, six journalists' associations together demanded Rozina's release at a meeting at the Jatiya Press Club.

The associations are: Dhaka Journalist Union (DUJ), Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ), Jatiya Press Club, Dhaka Reporters' Unity, Broadcast Journalists' Centre and TV Camera Journalist Association.

The leaders of the organisations will meet with Information Minister Hasan Mahmud, Law Minister Anisul Huq and Awami League General Secretary and Roads and Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader today.

"But we hope she will get bail in the meantime," said Kuddus Afrad, president of Dhaka Union of Journalists, while briefing the press after the meeting.

If she does not get bail today, the journalist leaders vowed a tougher movement.

Some bureaucrats have brought the government and the media at loggerheads over the Rozina issue, said Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury, former information advisor of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who was present at the meeting.

"We want to move away from that position. We want to take democracy and the country forward. We want to create an environment for free journalism. Our movement will continue. We will not only release Rozina, we will work together to remove the restrictions that are hindering free media," he said.

The leaders of the BFUJ as well as those of the newly-elected committee of Directors Guild, an organisation of television drama directors, met with the information minister at his Minto Road residence separately yesterday, a day before a Dhaka court's order on the bail petition of Rozina.

"Look at the Rozina Islam issue from a realistic point of view instead

of looking at it emotionally," the information ministers told the leaders of the BFUJ.

Talking to reporters after the meeting, Mahmud alleged that an anti-state quarter is trying to take advantage of the incident involving the Prothom Alo journalist at the health ministry on May 17.

"The Rozina Islam incident has been politicised as the anti-state quarters have become very active in capitalising on it."

He also commented on the statement made by Stéphane Dujarric, the spokesperson of United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres.

The minister said Khaleda Zia's former deputy press secretary Mushfiqul Fazal Ansari got a reply from an official on overall media by asking a question at the regular press briefing of the UN secretary-general.

"There is an ill-intended effort to conduct a campaign over that reply. The statement of a UN official and the UN's concern is not the same at all."

An investigation is going on to learn how Rozina has collected information in the past, Mahmud added.

'WHAT HAPPENED TO ROZINA IS UNPRECEDENTED'

Speakers in a webinar yesterday titled "Freedom of Press and Public Interest" described what happened to Rozina Islam as "unprecedented" and demanded her immediate release.

The Centre for Governance Studies in association with UK Aid and Asia Foundation organised the webinar.

"Rozina wrote investigative reports in the interest of the country and the people," said Julhas Alam, bureau chief of the Associated Press in Dhaka.

The scope and capacity of investigative journalism in the country are declining, said Zahirul Alam, NTV's head of news.

A variety of social alliances have been formed with the government to ensure journalists do not work independently, he added.

The incident with Rozina Islam was nothing new as journalists were being harassed whenever it hurt the government's interests," said Shoeb

Chowdhury, editorial board president of The Asian Age.

"Theft of information may be theft for others but for us, it is a process of information collection," said Shyamal Datta, editor of Bangla daily Bhorer Kagoj.

Public interest cannot be maintained by curtailing the freedom of the media, said Syeda Rizwana Hasan, chief executive of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association.

TOKEN HUNGER STRIKE
Journalists yesterday held a token hunger strike demanding withdrawal of the case against Rozina Islam and her immediate unconditional release.

Sitting in front of Dhaka Reporters' Unity, they demanded punishment of those who assaulted and harassed her at the secretariat.

"Corrupt officials are now teaching us investigative journalism. They want to say writing reports based on their press release is journalism," said Shamima Dola, editor of News Now Bangla.

Executive Editor of Prothom Alo Sajjad Sharif and Associate Editor Anisul Haque attended the strike on behalf of Prothom Alo.

'FORM A NEUTRAL PROBE COMMITTEE'

Dhaka Sub-Editors Council formed a human chain at Jatiya Press Club yesterday demanding a neutral probe committee to investigate the incident at the Secretariat and withdrawal of the case.

The organisation's President Mamun Farazi presided over a programme.

"We hope Rozina will be released unconditionally tomorrow (today). If that does not happen, we don't have any option but for a "no return home" movement. We have no scope to go back," said Molla Jalal, president of a faction of the BFUJ.

Journalists from different districts including Shariatpur and Bagerhat organised human chains.

Gonoforum and the United Communist League of Bangladesh, among political parties, also held programmes.

Record foreign aid use

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For developing countries, a budget deficit is not unusual as the government needs to spend big on building infrastructure to shore up future economic activities. The government meets the gap between income and expenditure through domestic and foreign borrowing obtained as loans or grants.

But keeping the deficit within 5 percent is recommended by the International Monetary Fund, and is in fact considered international best practice.

Historically, in Bangladesh, when the budget is drafted, a 5 percent deficit was projected but the actual deficit would invariably be about 4 percent every year as the ministries and divisions failed to use their allocated funds.

However, since fiscal 2018-19, the budget deficit has been trespassing the 5 percent-mark. This fiscal year, it is tipped to cross the 6 percent-mark.

But, that is no cause for alarm - yet.

"A 6 percent budget deficit is technically a non-issue even in normal times, not to speak of a health exigency and economically distressful time such as the pandemic," said Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist of the World Bank's Dhaka office.

As long as the 6 percent deficit goes towards the areas where extra funding is needed for the pandemic, it would not be a problem.

The areas that have risen in the priority list because of the pandemic include health, social protection, education, CMSMEs, agriculture and rural development.

A rise in budget deficit due to an increase in expenditure in these areas could pay high economic and social dividends, Hussain added.

The finance ministry is not too worried, either.

"There is no long-term risk for the government's higher expenditure for the pandemic and lower revenue collection

this fiscal year. In fact, the debt-GDP is still in the comfortable zone," said a finance ministry official requesting anonymity as he is not authorised to speak with media.

In the first nine months of fiscal 2020-21, revenue collection increased 6.4 per cent from a year earlier. But because of the ongoing countrywide shutdown, the momentum has taken a hit, it added.

Most countries are following an expansionary fiscal stance and the Bangladesh government is no different, said Zaid Bakht, a former research director of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies.

"On one hand, everyone is saying that you must spend to prop up the economy and do the health sector interventions - even if there is a deficit. And on the other hand, our tax-GDP ratio is very low and there has been a big shortfall in revenue target in recent times. Where would the funds come from?"

The raft of stimulus packages has increased the money supply in the economy and gave rise to inflationary risk.

"So for the government, foreign borrowing is a low-cost funding source. It is a logical conclusion that foreign loans are being used for deficit financing," said Bakht, currently the chairman of Agrani Bank.

Hussain, however, is doubtful of the government's ability to spend the foreign financing projected for the next fiscal year.

"It is highly ambitious. There is money in the pipeline, but the billion-dollar question to get nearly \$12 billion disbursed in one year is whether the administration can raise their game in implementing aided projects and carry out the reforms needed to get budget support from the donors," he added.

In fiscal 2019-20, the government managed to use about \$7.3 billion, which is the highest yet.

29 countries saw

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were more than 30 percent higher than the number of reported Covid-19 deaths. Even though not directly supported by our study, the situation in Bangladesh may not be very different from what we have observed in these developed nations," Dr Nazrul Islam told The Daily Star yesterday.

"Covid-19 deaths have been shown to be under-reported in most countries around the world. Moreover, deaths due to other causes such as cancers may have been higher than previous years," he said.

"Therefore," he added, "the actual number of excess deaths due to the Covid-19 pandemic may be higher than the reported deaths."

Using a mathematical model, the research team calculated weekly excess deaths in 2020 for each of the 29 countries, accounting for age and sex differences between countries, and also for seasonal and yearly trends in mortality over the four preceding years.

Overall, an estimated 979,000 total excess deaths occurred last year in the 29 countries analysed. All countries experienced excess deaths, except New Zealand, Norway, and Denmark.

The five countries with the highest absolute number of excess deaths were the US (458,000), the UK (94,400), Italy (89,100), Spain (84,100), and Poland (60,100). Only New Zealand had lower overall deaths than expected (2,500 less).

The excess deaths were largely concentrated among people aged 75 or older, followed by people aged 65-74 years, while deaths in children under 15 were similar to expected levels in most countries and lower than expected in some countries.

In most countries, the estimated number of excess deaths exceeded the number of reported deaths from Covid-19. For instance, in both the US and the UK, estimated excess deaths

were more than 30 percent higher than the number of reported Covid-19 deaths.

"It is unknown if everyone who died in Bangladesh in 2020 was tested to accurately determine whether the cause of death was Covid-19. So, the actual number of excess deaths due to Covid-19 may be higher than the reported deaths," Dr Nazrul said.

"Moreover, the number of deaths due to causes other than Covid-19 is also not precisely known in Bangladesh, which makes it difficult to estimate the extent of excess deaths in the country."

Dr Mushtaq Hussain, consultant of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) in Bangladesh, also thinks there were excess deaths in the country last year.

"There is a need for similar death analysis in the country. It will help to formulate policy in the healthcare system during the pandemic," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

"Actually, we need to focus on a community-based healthcare system to prevent avoidable deaths."

In most countries, age-specific excess death rates were higher among men than women, and the absolute difference in rates between the sexes tended to increase with age. However, in the US the excess death rate was higher among women than men in those aged 85 years or older, according to the study.

"Reliable and timely monitoring of excess deaths will help to inform public health policy in investigating the sources of excess mortality in populations and help to detect important social inequalities in the impact of the pandemic to inform more targeted interventions," Dr Nazrul said.

Future work will also be needed to understand the impact of national coronavirus vaccination programmes on mortality in 2021, the researchers concluded.

Govt moves to buy jabs from pvt UK supplier

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With the current stock about to be depleted completely and two million people waiting for their second shots of the Oxford vaccine, Bangladesh has been desperately appealing to different countries for the jabs.

Bangladesh earlier purchased three crore doses of the Oxford vaccine from drugmaker Serum Institute of India. But amid a steep rise in Covid-19 cases in India and reports of a shortage of the vaccine, the Indian government suspended vaccine exports in March.

Bangladesh requested the US and Canada to provide the shots, but has yet to receive what officials said is a positive response.

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen Thursday said the US has an additional 80 million doses of the Oxford vaccine.

The minister said he learnt unofficially that the US government is preferring to help India, Brazil, Spain and Indonesia before Bangladesh,

because the number of deaths and infections are higher in those countries.

"Deaths and infections in Bangladesh may be low, but we have been in trouble since India halted the export of vaccines. We need the vaccine," he said.

During a phone conversation last week, Momen requested the Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar to donate 15 lakh doses since the ban is on exporting.

After repeatedly requesting the UK for the vaccine, Bangladesh was recently told that the UK government could not provide any doses at the moment and advised to contact the private sector.

In July 2020, the high commission also requested AstraZeneca to hold human trials of its vaccine in Bangladesh. The company responded by saying that it had an agreement with the Serum Institute of India.

"Although we are in talks with the private sector now, we are re-appealing to the UK government again for the

vaccine," the high commission official said.

In an interview with ITV, a UK television network, Momen on Friday made an urgent appeal to the UK for the AstraZeneca vaccine.

"I'm not asking for much. I'm only asking for 1.6m AstraZeneca doses that they have... they should immediately disburse those to Bangladesh so that people can have their second doses," he said.

The UK government should help the Commonwealth member states. Besides, Bangladesh is a good friend of the UK and many Bangladeshis contribute to the UK economy, he said.

China, meanwhile, provided Bangladesh with 5 lakh doses of the Sinopharm vaccine last week and announced giving 6 lakh more. Bangladesh is in the final stage of making a deal to buy the Sinopharm vaccine from China and Sputnik V vaccine from Russia.

Cops took no steps despite two GDs

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His mother Aklima Begum alleged that police negligence was the reason for her son's death.

Speaking to The Daily Star yesterday, she said, "Police officials take financial benefits from such attackers and that is why my son had to die. The police did not take any step to ensure his safety even after he filed a GD... There were four to five policemen near the spot [where he died], but they took no action to save him."

She said that had police provided some security, her grandson would not have had to be an orphan at the moment.

However, Kazi Wazed Ali, officer-in-charge of Pallabi Police Station, told The Daily Star yesterday that Shahinuddin filed two separate GDs for security but he did not come to the police station when he was asked to provide details.

"We then sent a police team to his home to ask about what kind of security they want... We later came to know that the victim went to meet with the attacker himself after filing the GD. So, police had nothing to do with the incident."

Asked about presence of a police team near the murder spot, the OC said that there was no police team near the spot. "Police acted soon after they learned about the incident."

They said Shahinuddin was an accused in around 26 cases filed with Pallabi police on different charges, including narcotics, arms, explosives and woman and child repression act.

He was even arrested in the last week of April and got released on bail on May 11.

THE MURDER PLOT
Shahinuddin's family has about 10 acres of land within the boundaries of a project by former lawmaker MA Awal (Lakshimpur-1) called "Alinagar Residential Area" in Burirtek Alinagar area of North Kalshi in Pallabi.

It was a project run by Haveli Properties Developer Limited.

Shahinuddin's father Joyuddin had been under pressure for a long time from the Haveli Properties to sell the land. Awal had started applying muscle power as Joyuddin did not agree to sell the land, alleged the victim's family.

In early 2015, Joyuddin filed a case

with a Dhaka court.

Following the filing of the case, Joyuddin sons-- Shahinuddin and Mainuddin--had locked into a dispute with Awal, former lawmaker.

Awal had been using his 'cadres' to threaten the siblings. Due to continuous threats, their mother filed a GD seeking security in June 2015, sources said.

Since then, Shahinuddin came under attack by Awal's men a number of times.

His Family claims he went to file a case with Pallabi Police Station after the machete attack on November last year but police did not register. Even the attacker Sunon got released from jail after a couple of days of his arrest.

Finally on May 16, the attackers killed Shahinuddin.

SEVEN PEOPLE TOOK PART IN THE KILLING MISSION
Investigators said the attackers, in Awal's Kalabagan office, had planned to murder Shahinuddin three to four days ago.

Citing a conversation, a high official of the Rapid Action Battalion, conducting shadow investigation and requesting anonymity, said, "The attackers said they had stabbed

Movement

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Except for long-route buses, launches and trains, it seems everything came to normalcy.

Although most of the government offices remained shut, almost all private offices remained open alongside some government offices.

Health experts have again warned that such careless acts amid lax enforcement of the restrictions could result in a spike in the number of coronavirus cases.

There has been a rise in coronavirus infections after Eid-ul-Fitr, they said.

In five days from May 15, at least 5,345,826 active mobile phone subscribers entered the capital while 10,645,697 subscribers left Dhaka between May 4 and May 15, according to Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission.

The numbers are an indication of how many people have been travelling despite the restrictions on the operation of long-haul buses, trains and launches.

Yesterday, there was moderate to heavy traffic congestion at different intersections in the capital.

The government first imposed a week-long restriction from April 5 to contain the second surge of Covid-19 pandemic.

Later the authority extended the restriction till May 23 on several phases.

All eyes on

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journalist Rozina Islam's bail until today.

Assistant Public Prosecutor Hemayet Uddin Khan Heron earlier said that the prosecutors would use the extra time to place a video before the court that mysteriously surfaced on social media the night before Rozina's bail hearing.

The seven-minute-long footage shows some health ministry officials and policemen interrogating and manhandling the journalist while she describes how she came inside the personal secretary's room at the Secretariat through a source.

At one point, she says, "I made a mistake and I would be willing to give a written undertaking."

However, this video only shows seven minutes of Rozina's five-hour ordeal inside the ministry.

Meanwhile, Rozina's lawyers argued that nothing Rozina said under duress, without a magistrate's presence, could be used as evidence.

Her lawyers also pointed out that the video could not be taken into cognisance by the court as the case rests solely on the first information report filed by the police, which does not mention the video at all.

The health ministry has filed a case against Rozina under several sections of the Official Secrets Act and penal code. They accused the journalist of stealing and taking photos of "highly sensitive" government documents.

Shibbir Ahmed Osmani, a deputy secretary of the health services division, filed the case with Shabbagh Police Station on Monday night.

In his complaint, Shibbir said Bangladesh was in negotiations with several countries for purchasing Covid-19 vaccines and there were "non-disclosure agreements".

Rozina's family members and her colleagues refuted the allegations and said she was framed while discharging her professional duties because she exposed the corruption of certain health ministry officials.

Rozina has written several in-depth reports on corruption in the health sector amid the pandemic.

Rozina's confinement and arrest triggered countrywide protests by journalists.

Journalist leaders promised to launch tougher programmes if Rozina was not released by today.

On Tuesday, Rozina was taken to Kashimpur Central Women's Jail after a Dhaka court rejected the five-day remand plea.

The Detective Branch of Police (Ramna) is now investigating the case.

Shahinuddin earlier but he did not die. But this time, they would not let him go alive... Awal's 'cadres' Sunon, Manik, Monir, Iqbal, Murad and Hasan took part in the murder. While planning the murder, Awal told them they could take as much money as they need, but he needs action."

Sunon had taken money from Awal for the murder and even distributed some of it to the other attackers.

It Col Mohammad Khairul Islam, director (intelligence) at Rab headquarters, told The Daily Star that they are now looking for two absconding members of the group and are hoping to arrest them soon.

The Detective Branch of police is now investigating into the murder.

Six people, including Awal, were arrested and two have already given confessional statements.

Manas Kumar Podder, deputy commissioner of the DB, told The Daily Star that Awal is now on remand.

"We have got some information [regarding the incident] and are analysing that. Only then we will be able to speak