

BANGLADESH UPDATE



1,441
New cases in 24hrs



7,90,521
Total cases



12,401
Deaths



7,31,531
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE



3,484,400
Deaths



167,853,529
Total cases

Cyclone threatens Chalanbeel farmers

Many can't reap ahead of storm due to lack of labourers

AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR TOPI, back from Chalanbeel

Farmer Kazem Pramanik of Pabna's Chatmohar, who cultivated two bighas of Boro paddy last year, could not harvest most of the crops as they were damaged by cyclone Amphan and early floods. This year, he has grown paddy in three bighas but cyclone Yaas is threatening the harvest again.

Worried by the storm, the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) has advised farmers to harvest all their paddy even if they are 80 percent mature.

Kazem can't harvest quickly as there is a shortage of labourers.

Like him, most farmers in Chalanbeel area, the biggest wetland of the country's northern region, are worried about harvesting their paddy before the storm hits.

"Most of the labourers of Chalanbeel region go to different districts during the peak of Boro harvesting period [May-June]. We can hardly get necessary labourers in the peak season. It causes trouble for harvesting paddy in Chalanbeel area," said Kazem.

Most paddy fields in Chalanbeel area look ready for harvesting, but farmers in many areas were yet to start harvesting due to shortages of labourers. Many farmers begin harvesting half ripe paddy to save their paddy from the natural disaster.

"I have cultivated 3.5 bighas of paddy in Chalanbeel. Of them, two bighas are in the low-laying areas. Paddy from high areas has already been harvested and I'll need two weeks to reap paddy from the low-laying areas. As cyclone is nearing, I'm harvesting half ripe paddy to save it from the disaster," said Mojiyar Rahman, of Jaborkhal village in Chatmohar upazila.

Talking to The Daily Star, Masum Billah, Chatmohar upazila agricultural officer, said at least 70-80 percent paddy in Chalanbeel has already been harvested. Farmers are using modern technology due to lack of labourers.

"If farmers are interested, we are ready to help them in harvesting paddy by combine harvester in huge areas," he said.

Chalanbeel farmers, however, prefer harvesting crop manually by labourers

to using machines as most of the farmers cultivate small piece of land, said Nobir Uddin, a marginal farmer in Chalanbeel.

A total of 1.01 lakh hectares have been brought under Boro cultivation in eight upazilas of three districts in Chalanbeel which goes through Chatmohar, Vangura and Faridpur upazilas of Pabna, Singra, Gurudashpur and Boraigram upazilas of Natore and Tarash and Raiganj upazilas of Sirajganj, say offices of DAE in the upazilas, expecting production of 4.73 lakh tonnes paddy.

Farmers of different areas of Chalanbeel go for late cultivation of Boro paddy, as a second crop of the season, so harvesting is late in many areas.

Talking to this paper, Harunur Rashid, Gurudashpur upazila agricultural officer, said most farmers in the upazila cultivate paddy after harvesting mustard, so they have to go for late paddy harvesting.

Md Rokonzaman, Pabna's Faridpur upazila agricultural officer, however, said at least 45 percent paddy has been reaped in the upazila as most of the farmers went for late farming. They are now worried about saving their crop from disaster, he added.

There is a possibility of heavy rainfall on May 25-27 in 30 districts, especially in Khulna, Bagerhat, Barishal and Rajshahi divisions, the DAE said in an advisory.

In such a situation, farmers have been advised to follow some agro-climatic advice to protect standing crops from cyclone damage alongside instruction of harvesting the paddy that has matured up to 80 percent.

According to an estimate of the DAE, farmers cultivated paddy on 48.83 lakh hectares this season and harvested 90 percent of the crop.

Crop collection in the major belts of Boro paddy, including haor areas, has already been completed. The harvesting of late varieties recently began in some areas, including Rajshahi and Rangpur region and Manikganj district, where there will be no major impact of the cyclone, according to DAE.

Boro paddy accounts for nearly 55 percent of annual rice production.



Fishing trawlers are tied to the shore on Shibbaria river near tourist destination Kuakata yesterday. The fishermen have come home from the Bay following warnings about the impending storm Yaas.

PHOTO: SOHRAB HOSSAIN

Infection surges in border dists

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of global concern", which transmits easily, causes more severe illness, and has the capacity to evade treatment and vaccines.

Meanwhile, the Chapainawabganj district administration enforced a 7-day strict lockdown from yesterday to check the virus transmission, reports our correspondent in the district.

Describing the situation in the district as "severe", Deputy Commissioner Monjurul Hafeez said, "The Indian variant may have spread in the district despite the fact that the authorities ensured 14-day institutional quarantine of all India returnees."

Health experts say the higher the positivity rate, the greater the concern is.

According to the WHO recommendations in May last year, the Covid positivity rate has to remain below 5 percent for at least two weeks before governments can consider reopening.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Prof Tahmina Shirin, director at the IEDCR, said, "Virus transmission in several bordering districts is rising. Of the districts, Chapainawabganj saw the highest number of cases."

"Besides, Jashore, Jhenaidah and several other districts are also seeing a rise in Covid infections. The positivity rate was between 20 and 30 percent in these districts."

Tahmina also said the IEDCR has

enhanced surveillance in those districts, and the local administration will decide on further steps to curb the spread of the virus.

Health officials said the positivity rate was above 10 percent yesterday in at least a dozen districts, including Khulna, Sylhet, Kushtia, Lalmonirhat and Kurigram.

The districts seeing positivity rate of 10 percent and above are considered as "high-risk" zones, they mentioned.

The positivity rate in these districts was below 10 percent before the Eid holidays. It has been on the rise over the last one week, the officials pointed out.

Hussain Shafaat, civil surgeon in Satkhira, said, "We have been seeing a spike in virus cases for the last one week. We ran tests on around 20 symptomatic cases a day before the Eid-ul-Fitr and found one or two positive cases or even none. Yesterday, 67 samples were tested and 28 of those were found positive."

Contacted, Mushtuq Hussain, consultant at the IEDCR, said, "In our last week's [till May 22] analysis, we marked Chapainawabganj, Khulna, Sylhet and Satkhira as high-risk districts. The virus transmission is also rising in the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar."

Health officials said there could be links between the rise in virus transmission and the return of Bangladeshis from India and increased

public movement in recent days.

Tahmina said, "The rise could have been caused by the Covid-infected people returning from India. The Indian variant cannot be solely blamed for this. There is a chance of further rise in the virus transmission due to the relaxation of restrictions on public movement and plying of vehicles."

"This is the time for mango harvest. Many people will carry mangoes to the capital and other parts of the country from these bordering districts. This will raise the chance of further spread of the virus," she added.

DAILY COVID UPDATE

The health directorate reported 25 deaths from the novel coronavirus in 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday.

Another 1,441 infections were recorded during the period, taking the total number to 790,521.

Of the dead, 21 were men and four women. Thirteen of them were above 60 while the rest were between 21 and 60, according to the IEDCR.

With this, the total number of deaths stood at 12,401, and the overall death rate was 1.57 percent.

At least 834 Covid patients recovered in 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday, taking the total number to 731,531.

[Our correspondents in Rajshahi, Dinajpur and Sylhet contributed to this report.]

UNGA president arrives today

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

UN General Assembly President Volkan Bozkur arrives on a two-day visit to Bangladesh at the invitation of the government today.



During his stay in Bangladesh, he will call on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen.

He will also deliver remarks on the current international context - with a focus on global crises and emergencies - and reflect on the state of multilateralism and the UN system - at the Foreign Service Academy today and meet the UN Country Team in Dhaka.

Bozkur will also travel to Cox's Bazar on Wednesday to meet with Rohingya refugees and observe the vital work undertaken by UN Resident Coordinator and the UNHCR Representative in Bangladesh.

He is scheduled to leave Dhaka for Pakistan.

CTTC arrests Hamza in Kushtia for spreading extremism

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Mufti Amir Hamza,

a prominent speaker on Islam, was arrested yesterday evening in connection with "misinterpreting the religion and spreading extremism at waz mahfils (religious programmes)".

The Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) Unit of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) arrested Hamza in Kushtia, Md Asaduzzaman, additional commissioner of the DMP, also the chief of the CTTC, told The Daily Star.

"We are bringing him to Dhaka," he said.

Regarding the charges, Asaduzzaman said, "Hamza's involvement and evidence [against him] was found in a case filed under Anti-Terrorism Act."

He will be interrogated, said the official.

According to the CTTC, Hamza has been spreading misleading information in the name of Islam at different waz mahfils.

Several of his statements found on YouTube and other social media were instigating teenagers and luring them into militancy, CTTC officials said. He was hiding following the recent arrest of Hefajat leaders and activists, they said.

Sources said, 20-year-old Al Shakib was arrested on May 5 from the capital's Sher-e Bangla Nagar area allegedly for plotting to attack the parliament building. A case was filed in this connection with Sher-e Bangla Nagar Police Station under the Anti-Terrorism Act.

Shakib's phone had videos clips of speeches made by Ali Hasan Usama, Mahmudul Hasan Gumbi, Amir Hamza and Harun Izhar.

Counterterrorism officers started preparing a list of speakers who make provocative speeches online and at public gatherings.

Usama has been arrested.

Talking to The Daily Star, Jaan Mohammad, grandfather of Amir Hamza, said about 10 people entered Hamza's home while he was playing with his children.

They put him in a microbus parked about half a kilometre away and drove off.

Yaas gaining pace

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During a meeting on the preparations to tackle Yaas, he said, "Police, Ansar, BGB personnel and volunteers of Cyclone Preparedness Programme are ready. They will work according to instructions."

In Barishal the government has taken preparation to evacuate 20 lakh people if necessary.

Our correspondents in coastal districts have already started reporting rain in their districts.

The capital witnessed heavy showers late last night.

Vehicle data

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Operations of long-haul buses, passenger trains and launches resumed yesterday, a day after the government issued a circular lifting the restrictions for a week.

The notice said all public transport will operate during this period at half capacity following health safety rules.

WHAT BBA REPORTS SHOW?

Bangabandhu Bridge on the Jamuna River connects the capital with the north and north-western districts of the country with road and rail links.

The bridge authority earned Tk 49.18 crore last month as toll, down from Tk 59.02 crore in March.

The amount was Tk 27.58 crore in April last year. Operation of public transport remained suspended for around two months from March 26 last year to contain the spread of the virus.

Sources said around 3,500 to 3,800 buses use Bangabandhu Bridge daily in normal time, meaning 1.05 lakh to 1.15 lakh buses cross the bridge a month.

Around 3,500 to 4,000 cars cross the bridge daily in normal time, but the number increased by 2.5 to 3 times during the "lockdown". The number of motorcycles went up manifold, they said.

The number of vehicles increased further early this month as the Eid-ul-Fitr festival, which was celebrated on May 14, approached nearer. But the data for this month is not available yet as BBA releases statistics monthly.

However, the bridge saw a new record in transport movement and toll collection in 24 hours till 6:00am on May 13.

The highest 52,730 vehicles crossed the bridge during the period and Tk 2.99 crore was received as tolls, Ahsanul Kabir Pavel, executive engineer of BBA, had said at that time.

The situation was almost the same at Mukterpur Bridge on Dhaka-Munshiganj highway, the second bridge operated by BBA.

The authority earned tolls of Tk 1.51 crore in April, down from Tk 1.90 crore in March. The amount was Tk 0.83 crore in April last year, according to BBA data. **BUS, TRAIN, LAUNCH SERVICES RESUME**

Inter-district bus, train and launch services resumed yesterday across the country. Khandakar Enayet Ullah, secretary general of Bangladesh Road Transport Owners' Association, said they have instructed all their members to ensure that no passenger boards buses without his face being masked.

The association has deployed people at the bus terminals in Dhaka to monitor whether anyone was violating the government instructions, he told The Daily Star.

Visiting Gabtoli, Shyamoli, Kalyanpur and Mirpur Mazar Road in the capital yesterday, The Daily Star

correspondent found that transport workers asking passengers through loudspeakers to wear masks before getting on buses.

The number of passengers was less than the transport owners expected, Suvenker Ghosh Rakesh, joint secretary of Bangladesh Bus Truck Owners Association, said.

"We hope the number will increase gradually," Suvenker, also the managing director of Shyamoly NR Travels, told this correspondent.

Yesterday, railway authorities resumed operations of 37 pairs of passenger trains.

Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujon visited Kamalapur Railway Station to monitor whether all government instructions were followed properly.

Khairul Islam, divisional transport officer (Dhaka) of Bangladesh Railway, said eight trains left Dhaka as of 7:00pm, maintaining social distancing and health safety rules.

Tickets of around 40 percent seats were sold yesterday, another BR official said.

Launch services also resumed from Sadarghat Launch Terminal in Dhaka and other launch terminals across the country.

Joyal Abedin, joint director of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA), said launches operated from Sadarghat terminal since 6:00am.

He said they were working to make sure that all government instructions were followed.

Turkey details top IS suspect wanted by US

AFP, Istanbul

Turkish intelligence officers have arrested an Egyptian-born terror suspect wanted by Washington who was a top explosives expert for the Islamic State group, state media reported yesterday.

The suspect, identified as Mustafa Abdulwahab Mahmud and born in 1999, was detained with three others on the outskirts of Istanbul after fleeing Syria, the reports said.

The indictment said he joined the IS group in Syria, where he specialised in making suicide belts and various explosive devices.

The Istanbul prosecutor's office is seeking 22.5 years in prison on charges of membership of a terror group.

He was detained on a tip from US intelligence services, who have been tracking his movements, the media reports said, adding that he is believed to have been plotting attacks inside Turkey, including against US interests.

Mystery shrouds DU student's death

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The 24-year-old man was also the general secretary of Mime Action, an association of mime artists.

His family members and friends said Shabbagh police was negligent in that they found Hafizur with his throat slit near the Central Shaheed Minar on May 15 and took him to the hospital, but didn't bother informing the family.

The matter subsequently remained unknown to his family, friends and DU authorities for a week.

Mamunur Rashid, officer-in-charge of Shabbagh Police Station, told The Daily Star, "Around 8:30pm on May 15, police received information that a man slit his own throat in the Shaheed Minar area after taking a crescent dagger from a coconut seller there."

Hafizur's friends and family members demanded a fair investigation by scrutinising the CCTV footage.

Saddam Hossain, general secretary of DU Chhatra League, said yesterday that police should question three of Hafizur's friends, who were with him on the evening of May 15.

According to family sources, Hafizur returned to Dhaka from Brahmanbaria on May 15, a day after Eid, and informed his family that he had reached safely.

His family later found his phone switched off and, failing to communicate with him or trace his whereabouts, filed a general diary with Brahmanbaria's Kaska Police Station.

Later, Shabbagh police was informed about Hafizur going missing.

On Sunday, the deceased's elder brother Habibur Rahman visited the Shabbagh Police Station and asked about his brother, said OC Mamunur. Police then told him there was a body at the DMCH morgue matching his brother's description, and Habibur went there with police and identified the body, the OC said.

Meanwhile, a 24-second video clip was doing the rounds on Facebook yesterday where Hafizur was seen sitting on a footpath, wearing only three-quarter pants, with his throat slit. Seconds later, he stood up and then three policemen were seen helping the injured Hafizur take a rickshaw.

Shabbagh police filed an unnatural death case in this connection.

According to the inquest report by police, Hafizur's body had a slit throat, and stab wounds in his right hand and left leg.

Anwar Hossain, the coconut seller and also the first witness of the incident, refused to comment when called on the phone. Another witness, Mohammad Jalil, who runs a tea shop in front of Dhaka Medical College Hospital, said that he saw a man in a bloody state in front of the outpatient department of the medical college. "Later, police took him to the hospital in a van. I don't know anything else."

The mobile phone of a third witness, identified in the inquest report, was found switched off.

Hafizur's family members said they have yet to decide whether to file a murder case.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Hafizur's elder brother Habibur Rahman said, "Hafizur told us he was going to Dhaka to discuss business matters with his friends."

Asked whether he sensed distress in his younger brother, Habibur said, "I did not see any frustration. He celebrated Eid with joy."

Ariful Islam, inspector (operations) of the police station, who is investigating the case, said the autopsy report would determine whether it was a suicide or murder. Police will investigate why Hafizur came to Dhaka just a day after Eid, and see whether there are business matters involved.

He refused to give any further information.

Dhaka University Proctor Prof Dr AKM Golam Rabbani said the campus was almost empty the day after Eid. Such a big incident took place in Shaheed Minar area, but the proctorial team was not aware of it -- only the police knew about it, he said.

"We request everyone to provide evidence to the police," he said.

In a statement, DU Vice-chancellor Prof Akhtaruzzaman requested the DMP Commissioner to take steps so that police can submit a full probe report over the death.

Assistant Proctor Liton Kumar Saha told The Daily Star that the university had formed a four-member probe

Small businesses see stimulus funds at last

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lending to large industries.

"When the package was announced, the private banks made sure their reliable large borrowers got funds from the package. But now, they are being more careful."

The state banks though are not being as selective, he said, adding that Agrani achieved its disbursement target for the sector, too.

A total of 23 stimulus packages involving Tk 128,441 crore -- which is 4.9 percent of the country's GDP -- was announced by the government since the novel coronavirus put down its roots in Bangladesh in March last year.

Of the schemes, 11 are credit-based stimulus packages involving Tk 103,700 crore.

As of March, their implementation status stands at 70.4 percent.

Of the 11 packages, seven involving Tk 87,750 crore are being implemented through the banking system, the tenure of many of which will come to an end in June.

"Since the pandemic is not nearing its end anytime soon, the government is mulling over extending their tenure by another 2-3 years," said a finance ministry official requesting anonymity as he is not authorised to speak with media.

The government will most likely set aside Tk 12,000 crore as interest subsidy for three years for the loans in the upcoming budget due to be unveiled on June 3, he added.

However, many remained out of the purview of the stimulus packages,

particularly those engaged in informal work, whose livelihood was battered for the necessary movement control orders imposed to slow the spread of the highly contagious pathogen.

Experts said the schemes could not reach them due to a lack of a comprehensive database.

"There is a challenge in reaching assistance under the stimulus packages to the informal sector workers since it is difficult to select the real deserving people," said Moshir Rahman, economic affairs advisor to the Prime Minister, at a webinar on Sunday.

He, however, said the government is trying to take assistance to those who need it badly with the help of local representatives.

Selim Raihan, executive director of

the South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (SANEM), a think-tank, suggested setting up a separate window in each bank for disbursing loans to the CMSMEs as they struggle with the existing complicated loan procedure.

"Banks should not think of profit when lending to the CMSMEs under the stimulus packages," he said, while advising the government to enlist the service of the non-governmental organisations too.

There might be risks of default but the government needs to take some risk.

"The micro and small enterprises generate huge employment and are integrated with different supply chains of our economy. They are lying in a vulnerable stage and have no strong voice," Raihan added.