

## PM flags

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capacity of carrying 150 tonnes in its five wagons, will run on the route every day. The transport cost is up to Tk 1.3 per kg and Tk 1,300 per tonne of mango.

The train will stop at 14 stations on the route for loading mangoes. It may make stoppages at other stations based on parcel booking and unloading.

At the function, the prime minister also virtually laid the foundation stone of Madhukhali (Faridpur)-Kamarkhali-Magura New Rail Line Construction Project.

Bangladesh Railway is implementing the project to build the 24.80 km broad-gauge track at an estimated cost of Tk 1,202 crore in 18 months.

Speaking at the programme, Hasina said the government has been working to expand the rail network throughout the country.

She said there is also a plan to construct a high speed rail line on the Dhaka-Chattoagram route. The government will construct the high speed line if the soil is found suitable after conducting a feasibility study, she added.

Besides, the rail connectivity with neighbouring India on different routes, which remained suspended after the 1965 war, is now being restored and the connectivity on some routes has already been resumed, she said.

Hasina said there is a plan to extend the railway connectivity to Siliguri, India.

Talking about the Madhukhali-Kamarkhali-Magura rail line, the PM said the people of Magura will be benefited from the rail connectivity in a larger way once the construction of Padma Bridge is completed.

She directed the authorities concerned to expand the new rail line to Kustia and Meherpur districts.

Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan presided over the function joining the event from Magura.

## Covid cases fall

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Against a total of 15,915 tests yesterday, the positivity rate was 8.12 percent while it was 9.11 percent on the previous day.

With this, the overall positivity rate was 13.50 percent.

At least 1,291 Covid-19 patients have recovered in this period.

With this, the total number of recoveries has reached 735,157, and the recovery rate at 92.47 percent.

Among the 22 dead, 14 were males and eight females.

Of them, one was aged between 21 and 30 years, one between 31 and 40 years, three between 41 and 50 years, six between 51 and 60, and 11 were above 60 years, added the release.

Meanwhile, the number of new Covid-19 cases continued rising in Satkhira district.

According to the Satkhira civil surgeon office, a total of 58 samples were collected for rt-PCR test on Tuesday. Of those, 25 were positive.

Due to public holidays, sample collection was kept stopped on Wednesday.

According to the official, there were 100 patients in the 88-bed Covid-19 unit of Satkhira Medical College Hospital yesterday.

"We have never seen such rush of Covid-19 patients since the beginning of Covid-19 emergency. The number of patients is rising; we are considering lockdown to control the virus transmission," Hussain Shafaat, civil surgeon in Satkhira, told The Daily Star yesterday.

## Ancient Roman

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Researchers with the University of Cadiz (UCA), who have led the dig, have called the find "exceptional" and estimate it dates back to the 5th century AD.

Now, the discovery could completely alter the way historians think about the area: the existence of such a large bathing complex suggests it may have been a far more significant post within the Roman Empire than has previously been thought.

Archaeologist Dario Bernal said the baths would have provided hygiene and leisure to the workers of the fish traps and salting factories in the area.

The find was part of the university's Arqueostr project in which researchers hope to learn more about the production of fish products and sauces during the period of Roman occupation in the region.

Some medieval ceramics were also found nearby during the dig.

At a separate UCA excavation at nearby Cape Trafalgar, meanwhile, at least seven Roman salting pools - used to preserve food - were found, with depths ranging from 5 feet to 6.5 feet. Some remains of preserves were also found inside.

As well as the Roman artefacts, researchers also discovered an intact prehistoric tomb at the Cape Trafalgar site.

The university said the burial site was 4,000 years old and contained the remains of several individuals.

"It is wonderful," Patricia del Pozo, Andalusia's culture minister, said, adding that the excavations showed that the region was "an incredibly attractive area for all types of civilizations, which endows us with incredible history".



Palestinian Hamas militants attend an anti-Israel rally in Khan Younis, in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## New mothers skip check-up for fear of Covid

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where to go for help.

"That I am not happy with the miracle of life also makes people judge me."

In terms of consultation, Radifah said, "I'm just heavily relying on the internet for every symptom but this is not how I had envisioned my pregnancy."

The fear that new mothers have during the pandemic had become even more real after Rifat Sultana, senior newsroom editor of Ekattor, died of Covid-19 after giving birth at the capital's Impulse Hospital on April 16, even before she could hold the baby in her arms.

According to experts, in order to ensure safe a safe pregnancy, it is essential that all pregnant women, including those with confirmed or suspected Covid-19 infections, receive high-quality care, before, during and after childbirth. This includes antenatal, new-born, postnatal, intrapartum and mental health care.

However, the pandemic has created a real challenge for the government to ensure the major pillars of safe motherhood -- family planning, antenatal and postnatal care, safe

delivery and essential obstetric care -- for a large number of women, even though, Unicef last year predicted that some 2.4 million babies will be born during Covid-19 pandemic in Bangladesh.

Data from the Directorate General of Health Services showed that only 33 out of 63 district hospitals are performing all key functions of emergency obstetric care.

"Trends in maternal health services in Bangladesh before, during and after Covid-19 lockdowns: Evidence from national routine service data", a study by The Bangladesh Population Council, also indicated that antenatal and postnatal visits were 50 percent lower in April 2020 compared to April 2019.

Even after signs of improvement in June and July 2020, the figures remained 20 to 25 percent lower than those in July 2019, the study said.

At the same time, both normal delivery (42 percent) and C-sections (41 percent) in health care facilities saw a considerable decline during the 2020 lockdown, the study found.

Experts also believe that since the number of child marriage increased drastically during the pandemic,

it could lead to a real health consequence, because when a girl is married during childhood, pregnancy occurs quicker than women who marry at older ages.

A recent study by Manusher Jonno Foundation found that at least 13,886 children from 84 upazilas in 21 districts were forced into marriages from April to October, last year, 48 percent of whom were between 13-15 years old.

Dr Mohammad Sharif, director of maternal and child health services of Directorate General of Family Planning, also admitted that there was a service disruption during last year's lockdown as health facilities were closed at that time.

"According to our MIS data, normal deliveries at Union Health and Family Welfare Centres decreased by only nine percent, and antenatal visits were at 11 percent in 2020. However, the situation has improved this year, as all the centres were opened, and all health workers received protection kits.

"What is more important is during the last year's lockdown, the number of patients were higher in all our maternity hospitals in the capital, due

to the closure of all private clinics. This time, we have also been trying to ensure quality services [in all hospitals and clinics]," he added.

According to Pulak Raha, team leader at Advance Family Planning, on this year's Safe Motherhood Day, special attention needs to be paid through massive campaigns to prevent and minimise negative consequences of Covid-19 for pregnant women and new-borns.

Monjun Nahar, head of advocacy and communication at Marie Stopes Bangladesh, said antenatal and postnatal care must be given at least over phone or through mobile apps so that pregnant mothers can avoid the risk of Covid-19 infection through face-to-face visits at health facilities.

She also stressed that in rural and hard-to-reach areas, government hospitals must have a budget for vehicles to transport pregnant mothers from their homes to health facilities.

On the other hand, Pulak said that to ensure antenatal and postnatal visits, and safe delivery in rural areas, the government needs to initiate alternative door-to-door services.

## Nixon asks India, Pakistan to show maximum restraint

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NIXON'S LETTER TO YAHYA

In another letter dated May 28, 1971, Nixon expressed his satisfaction to Pakistan President Yahya Khan over the latter's positive response to the suggestions made by the US to restore peace in East Pakistan. "I was gratified to learn of your statesmanlike decision to accept formally the assistance of the United Nations in organizing an international humanitarian relief effort for the people of East Pakistan and of your letter to Secretary

General U Thant confirming that decision. I have also noted with satisfaction your public declaration of amnesty for the refugees and commitment to transfer power to elected representatives. I am confident that you will turn these statements into reality," said Nixon.

The US president expressed his particular concern for the people of the coastal area who had been affected by the cyclonic disaster in November, 1970. "I can assure you that my government and countrymen are already prepared not only to resume

humanitarian relief efforts in this special area but to extend them to the rest of East Pakistan under the aegis of the United Nations in accordance with arrangements now under discussion," added Nixon.

He also urged Yahya to continue to exercise restraint both along Pakistan's borders with India and the country's general relations with that country. "I believe, therefore, that it is absolutely vital for the maintenance of peace in the Subcontinent to restore conditions in East Pakistan conducive to the return of refugees from Indian

territory as quickly as possible," emphasised Nixon.

**RESISTANCE FIGHT CONTINUES**  
Bangladeshi freedom fighters blew off Kalikapur Railway Bridge near Comilla today. On the same day, the Pakistan army brought a company of soldiers at Raghunathpur, near the Comilla-Brahmanbaria road. Freedom fighters ambushed the enemy unit and several Pakistani soldiers and an officer were killed.

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## High salinity threatens fish spawning in Halda river

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hazards that pollute the Halda.

The authorities concerned has taken multiple measures to this end.

The government last year declared the river as Bangabandhu Fisheries Heritage, banning 12 types of activities, including fishing, sand lifting, water withdrawal, plying of mechanised boats, construction of dams, and dumping of any industrial or domestic waste in the river.

Apart from this, a unit of river police has been deployed to oversee the river.

Visiting the areas on the banks of Halda, this correspondent talked to around 20 egg collectors who attributed the poor spawning of fish to their bad luck.

Monindro Jolodas of Ramdasmunsir

Hat in Hathazari told this paper that once they used to live off by fishing in the Halda. As there has been a ban on fishing in the river since 2010, they wait for this time to collect eggs.

"This year, we never thought that there would have been such poor spawning of fish. It is our bad luck as there was no enough rain and hilly torrent and on top of that, a rise in salinity in Halda water forced the brood fish to lay less eggs," he said.

He added that he collected three buckets of eggs last year, but this year he only got half a bucket of eggs.

Abu Bakkar, a resident of Pondit Bari along the Halda, said he sold fish fry worth Tk 18,000 last year. This year the eggs he managed to catch would not hatch out as those are affected by

salinity.

Echoing the view of Bakkar, Elias Hossain, a seasoned egg collector of Halda, said such salinity was seen in 1991 when a strong cyclone hit the Chattogram coast.

"I have never seen such salinity except this time since then. The cyclone that hit India contributed to a steep rise in salinity in the Halda water this time," he added.

Manzoorul Kibria, professor of Zoology department at Chattogram University, also a renowned Halda researcher, has found 77 times more salinity in Halda water in three consecutive tests at Halda Research Laboratory on Tuesday.

"The salinity found in Halda water is 36.9 PPT [parts per thousand] where

the standard is 0.5 PPT," he said.

No one has ever seen this massive salinity. Cyclone storm Yaas has brought saline water to the Halda river from the sea, he said.

Farhana Lovely, fisheries officer of Chattogram Fisheries Department, told The Daily Star that they were collecting information of egg collection.

The fisheries and livestock ministry has formed a committee to assess the egg collection, which will send their tally to the secretary of the ministry. Later, the ministry will reveal the total amount of egg collection, she added.

Around 25,536kg of eggs were collected from the Halda last year.

About 1,000 people collect eggs from the river.

## Biden orders new probe

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China is intensely sensitive to allegations it could have done more to stop the spread of a pandemic that has gone on to kill well over 3.4 million people and has devastated economies since emerging in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019.

Beijing rejects the theory the virus may have emerged from a virology lab in Wuhan and has instead accused the US of peddling "conspiracies" and politicising the pandemic.

The Biden administration's "motive and purposes are clear", Zhao Lijian a ministry of foreign affairs spokesman said yesterday, rejecting the need for a new investigation into the pandemic.

"The dark history of the US intelligence community has long been known to the world," he added, referring to the US' unfounded allegations of weapons of mass

destruction which led to its invasion of Iraq.

Reviving the lab leak theory "is disrespectful to science... and also a disruption to the global fight against the pandemic", Zhao said.

But the idea of virus release from a Wuhan lab is gaining increasing traction in the United States.

Citing a US intelligence report, The Wall Street Journal reported Sunday that a trio from the Wuhan Institute of Virology were hospitalised with a seasonal illness in November 2019, a month before Beijing disclosed the existence of a mysterious pneumonia outbreak.

The natural origin hypothesis -- backed as the most likely by the WHO expert team who visited China -- holds that the virus emerged in bats then passed to humans, likely via an intermediary species.

This theory was widely accepted at

the start of the pandemic, but as time has worn on, scientists have not found a virus in either bats or another animal that matches the genetic signature of SARS-CoV-2.

**INDIA-SECOND WAVE**  
The pandemic has killed at least 3,500,321 people worldwide since the virus first emerged in December 2019, according to an AFP compilation of official data yesterday.

India's health ministry yesterday reported a steady decline in new Covid-19 cases has been recorded for the last 20 days, with 24 states witnessing a dip in active cases since the last week.

It also noted that the country is on a downswing of the second wave of Covid-19. "We are on a downswing of the second wave of Covid-19 and believe that it will be sustained even when restrictions are significantly

relaxed," the ministry said.

The ministry also said that while Covid-19 testing has increased manifold, a steady decline in weekly Covid-19 positivity rate has been seen since the last three weeks.

On possible adverse effects of taking the second dose of a different Covid vaccine, it said, "If second dose of a different Covid vaccine is taken, any significant adverse effect is unlikely, but we need more scrutiny and understanding in this regard."

India reported 211,298 new infections yesterday, still the world's highest daily rise, but nearly half the daily infections it recorded earlier this month.

The government scrapped local trials for "well-established" foreign coronavirus vaccines as it tries to accelerate the vaccination rollout to counter the world's worst surge in infections.

## Israeli strikes

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leave the Al Aqsa mosque compound in East Jerusalem and later launched rockets towards Israel.

Bachelet said "indiscriminate" strikes from rockets launched by Hamas constituted "a clear violation of international humanitarian law".

She said Israel's strikes in Gaza, including shelling, missile strikes and attacks from the sea, caused widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure and fatalities.

"Despite Israel's claims that many of these buildings were hosting armed groups or being used for military purposes, we have not seen evidence in this regard," Bachelet said.

"If found to be indiscriminate and disproportionate, such attacks might constitute war crimes," she added. Hamas says it is struggling for Palestinian rights against Israeli oppression and denies using civilians as human shields. It said Israel's actions against Gaza are part of a strategy of collective punishment.

Meanwhile, Egypt and the United States said they would work together to reinforce a ceasefire between Israel and Palestinian militants as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Cairo and Amman on Wednesday on a regional tour.

Egypt has longstanding relations with both sides in the conflict and played a key role in brokering the ceasefire after 11 days of violence, in coordination with the United States.

"We've had in Egypt a real and effective partner in dealing with the violence, bringing it to a close, relatively quickly," Blinken said in Cairo after meeting with President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry and intelligence chief Abbas Kamel.

The United States and Egypt were now "working closely together build something positive", he said.

## Internet may slow

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This could force the international terrestrial cable companies to procure transborder bandwidth from India as backup.

The submarine cable which will be operated on today is called SEA-ME-WE-4. Bangladesh was connected to it in 2005.

The government later allowed several private entities to import bandwidth from India using underground cables.

BSCCL plugged Bangladesh with SEA-ME-WE 5, the second submarine cable, in 2017.

BSCCL Managing Director Mashiur Rahman said users will not suffer much because internet traffic remains low on Fridays.

He added that no significant problem will arise during voice calls and other internet services as additional bandwidth will be available, thanks to the second submarine cable.

## Australian ambassador barred from China spy trial

AFP, Beijing

Australia's ambassador to China was barred from the trial of an academic held on spying charges yesterday, in a case that has exacerbated a bitter row between the two nations.

The trial of Australian Yang Jun, detained for more than two years on accusations of espionage, was set to be held behind closed doors in Beijing with a heavy security presence outside the courthouse yesterday morning.

Chinese-born Yang, 56, who also goes by the pen name of Yang Hengjun, is one of two high-profile Australians detained in China on charges of spying.

Australia's Foreign Minister Marise Payne yesterday voiced deep concerns about China's handling of the case, as a letter from Yang was released maintaining his innocence and referencing torture while being detained.

"We have not seen any explanation or evidence for the charges that have been brought against him," Payne told ABC radio, adding she had hoped the trial would be "transparent" with consular officials granted access.

But Australian ambassador Graham Fletcher was turned away from the courtroom when he arrived yesterday.

"This is deeply regrettable, concerning and unsatisfying," Fletcher told media outside the courtroom afterwards.

"We've long had concerns about this case, including a lack of transparency, and therefore conclude it to be an instance of arbitrary detention."

Fletcher left the courthouse shortly afterwards. It was not immediately clear if Yang's lawyer was with him, nor if the trial had started.

A convoy of police cars and vans was later seen arriving at the court, but it was not clear whether Yang was inside. Authorities gave media no information about the case.

Yang was detained on a rare return to China in January 2019.

Beijing has outlined almost no details of the case against him since he was taken into custody.

In October the foreign ministry confirmed that charges of "espionage" had been filed against Yang and the case has been accepted by the court, without giving more information.