

BANGLADESH UPDATE

1,043
New cases in 24hrs

7,97,386
Total cases

12,543
Deaths

7,39,408
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

3,544,243
Deaths

170,448,750
Total cases

BANSHKHALI POWER PLANT WORKERS

Stop their harassment

63 prominent citizens urge govt

UNB, Dhaka

Some 63 prominent citizens of the country urged the government to take steps to stop the harassment of the workers of the Banshkhali coal-fired power plant in connection with the incident in which six workers were killed in police firing on April 17 this year.

The joint statement was signed by advocate Sultana Kamal, Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury, Khushi Kabir, Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, Badiul Alam Majumder, Prof Anu Mohammad, Syed Iftakharuzzaman, Syeda Rezwana Hasan and Dr Shahidul Alam, among others.

The statement alleged that the police, instead of conducting an impartial and independent inquiry to the incident, arrested Engineer

Shahnewaj Chowdhury from Gandamara area of Banshkhali on May 27 for his post on Facebook.

As a result, it said, nobody will dare to speak against any corruption and irregularities of the coal-fired power project.

Through this Facebook post, Shahnewaj expressed his own opinion and urged the youths to play a role against the illegal activities and corruption which should not be deemed as a move to create anarchy or stability, said the statement.

It mentioned a High Court bench on May 4 has ordered the authorities concerned to pay condensation of Tk 5 lakh to each of the victims and provide security and protection to the workers, families and locals of the Banshkhali power plant and not to harass them anyway.



A locally made three-wheeler carrying a load of freshly harvested paddy to a rice mill in Nimtoli area of Munshiganj yesterday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Govt decides to share cost

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including exorbitant airfare for Middle East-bound workers, and vaccination of migrants departing, a top official of the expatriates' welfare ministry said.

More than a thousand Saudi-bound workers have already missed their flights in the last five days as they failed to book hotels for the quarantine, alleged the workers.

Biman took nine days to comply with the advisory. It resumed flights to the kingdom yesterday after nine days of suspension.

The quarantine, however, is not mandatory for those who have already taken two doses of Covid-19 vaccine of Pfizer, Oxford-AstraZeneca and Moderna and 14 days have passed since the administration of their second dose.

On Thursday, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen said having realised the problems being faced by the Saudi-bound migrants, the prime minister has instructed the foreign ministry to take initiatives for arranging the hotel bookings.

About providing financial support to the workers, Saleheen yesterday said if a migrant worker needs Tk 40,000 for the hotel stay, the ministry will give them Tk 20,000 in cash assistance.

The ministry will provide Tk 25,000 if anyone needs Tk 50,000 or more.

He said the financial assistance will also be provided to those who have already gone to Saudi Arabia after the travel advisory was issued.

In that case, the Bangladesh embassy in Saudi Arabia will verify the cost of their hotel stay and will hand the cash assistance to the Bangladeshis following verification, Ahmed Munir Saleheen explained.

About vaccinating all migrant departing, Saleheen said they were working to figure out how this "huge task can be completed easily".

"We have asked the departing workers to apply for vaccination through the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training [BMET],"

he added.

QUICK RESPONSE TEAM

In a press release yesterday, the ministry said a "quick response team" was formed to resolve on a priority basis different problems being face by migrant workers.

Arif Ahmed Khan, director, Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB), has been made convener of the seven-member team, the release says.

Other members of the team are Senior Assistant Director Sarwar Alam of the ministry, Senior Statistical Officer Masud Rana of BMET, and WEWB's Deputy Director Zahid Anwar, Assistant Director Azizul Islam Bhuiyan, Deputy Assistant Director Abdul Quader, and Office Assistant/Computer Operator Mohammad Moniruzzaman.

BIMAN RESUMES KSA FLIGHTS
Biman yesterday resumed its flight operation to Saudi Arabia in line with the new travel advisory issued by the Gulf Council.

A top official of the national flag carrier told The Daily Star that the first flight left the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport for Dammam at 3:30pm and second flight to Jeddah at 6:15pm. The third flight to Riyadh was scheduled to fly at 3:20am.

He also said Biman was assisting Saudi-bound migrant workers in booking hotels.

On May 19, Biman said it primarily suspended all flights to Saudi Arabia for five days starting from May 20.

Biman later extended the suspension period for four more days as it failed to complete necessary measures to comply with the travel advisory, sources at the Biman said.

Biman currently operates flights to three destinations in Saudi Arabia. The destinations are Riyadh, Dammam and Jeddah. The airline operates 19 flights a week to these destinations.

Saudi Arabia is the largest destination for Bangladesh migrants. At least 26 lakh expatriates are currently working in different sectors in the country.

Will maintain friendship

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on the occasion of the International Day of UN Peacekeepers yesterday.

She joined the event from Gono Bhaban through videoconferencing.

Hasina said the prime task of the government is to improve the economic condition of the people of the country, remove poverty, and ensure education, healthcare and employment for the future generations.

The theme of this year's International Day of UN Peacekeepers is: "The road to a lasting peace: Leveraging the power of youth for peace and security".

The PM said keeping the theme of the Day in mind, the government wants to establish young and youth force as one of the agents for ensuring world peace.

"I believe that our young members of the armed forces and police force are ready to face the challenges of establishing world peace in the 21st century."

The PM said the government wants to prepare the future force to face these challenges to ensure peace. "The young generation has to learn that peace is the only way of development, security and welfare."

Hasina said Bangladesh always stands ready to establish peace at any corner in the world under the UN Security Council.

She asked peacekeepers of Bangladesh Army, Navy, Air Force and Police to accomplish their responsibilities with professionalism, honesty, integrity and sincerity.

"Bangladesh has been playing a very important role in maintaining world peace and security as well as building culture of peace in the world. Bangladesh's peacekeepers are working at different UN peace missions risking their lives particularly in conflict-prone countries," the PM

said.

She said steps have been taken to develop Bangladesh's peacekeepers as the most qualified through providing training to them with improved technology and equipment to face the new challenges.

Highlighting Bangladesh's peacekeepers' contributions in maintaining world peace, the premier said they have brightened the image of the country alongside upholding flag of the United Nations by demonstrating their efficiency.

"That's why Bangladesh has now become one of the highest number of peacekeeper providing countries in the world," she said.

The premier said some 6,742 peacekeepers are deployed in different UN missions right now and officials at the ranks of major general and brigadier are also there as deputy force commander and sector commander respectively.

She hoped that Bangladesh peacekeepers would be able to establish the country as a strong peace building nation in the world alongside upholding dignity of the national flag.

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen, Army Chief Gen Aziz Ahmed and UN Resident Coordinator Mia Seppo also spoke at the programme.

The PM also interacted with peacekeepers at various places across the globe through videoconferencing.

At the start of the programme, a minute's silence was observed to show respect to those peacekeepers who sacrificed their lives for establishing peace.

A short video documentary on Bangladesh's peacekeeping missions was played at the programme.

The foreign minister handed awards to the family members of the deceased and injured peacekeepers for their sacrifice and bravery.

Put 8 districts on lockdown now

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"Seven of the 13 new patients have not been to India recently. The Indian variant has certainly started transmitting among local people," IEDCR Director Prof Tahmina Shirin told The Daily Star yesterday.

One other locally transmitted case of the Indian variant was detected earlier in Jashore and the total number of people carrying the variant is now 20, according to the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data (GISAIID).

Detecting the specific variant of a virus requires genome sequencing, a complicated and expensive process that takes 3-7 days to complete.

The weekly epidemiological analysis of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), meanwhile, showed that compared to the previous week, the nationwide transmission of coronavirus has increased by around 22 percent in the seven days preceding yesterday.

The latest weekly analysis identified over 30 districts as high-risk zones with 10 percent or higher positivity rates, up from 25 districts in the previous week.

The situation in Dhaka, Sylhet and Cox's Bazar is also concerning, Faisal said.

TRANSMISSION ON THE RISE

When around 80 lakh people reportedly travelled out of the capital and returned after the Eid holidays earlier this month, epidemiologists expressed concerns that the transmission rate might spike again.

On May 18, the national positivity rate rose to 8 percent and continued rising slowly and steadily, reaching 10 percent on Tuesday. Yesterday's positivity rate was 7.91 percent against 13,184 tests.

According to the weekly epidemiological analysis by the DGHS, 9,660 people, including 1,043 in the 24 hours preceding 8:00am yesterday, tested positive in the past week.

The number was 7,930 in the previous week.

The number of tests also increased by over 6 percent, reaching 1,09,651 from 1,03,121 the week before.

Since the second wave of coronavirus began in the second week of March, the daily positivity rate rose to the highest

23 percent on April 1. On April 16, the transmission started declining amid the countrywide travel restrictions imposed on April 5. The rate fell to the lowest, around 7 percent, on May 12.

"Although the transmission has not spiked after Eid, it has not declined the way it was declining before Eid. Now the Indian variant has spread to the community level and the restrictions have been lifted. Now all of a sudden, we can see spikes in Covid-19 cases in several districts," IEDCR Consultant Mushtuq Hussain told The Daily Star yesterday.

First detected in India last year, the Indian variant, known as B.1.617, is the fourth variant of concern which is more transmissible and has spread to 50 countries so far.

On May 8, the IEDCR detected the first two cases of the Indian variant in Bangladesh.

"If Covid-19 cases rise suddenly in a remote district, it will be tough to tackle the situation with inadequate health facilities in those areas," he added.

Young female TikTok users targeted

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Tejgaon police has interrogated a few India-returned victims. Yesterday, their families came to Hatirjheel Police Station to meet the girls, but failed despite several attempts.

A relative of Saima, wishing not to be named, told The Daily Star that Saima and the four girls were kept at a rented house in Bengaluru. A man controlled the trade over phone and sent the girls to clients.

"Before going to India in March, Saima had been missing for five days. We could not trace her. Then she called us from India and told us that Ridoy took her there... A few days later, she called again and said she was being tortured and wanted to come home at any cost."

Two of the girls who went along with her, fled the house first and waited for her near the border. After two days, Saima was also able to flee Bengaluru.

"We sent Tk 50,000 to the girls, who managed people for help at the border and then returned to Dhaka with Saima," said the relative of the girl.

He said a law enforcement agency picked up Saima from her Hatirjheel home on Thursday night, interrogated her and released her the next day.

On Friday night, Hatirjheel police took her into custody.

'RACKET TARGETS FEMALE TIKTOKERS'
Ridoy has more than 71,000

A transnational gang, involving some Bangladeshis, has been trafficking young girls using Tiktok and forcing them into sex work in India, Md Shahidullah, deputy commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (Tejgaon Division), said at a press briefing at his office yesterday.

"School and college students, and sometimes young housewives are their targets."

Police found a Facebook group administered by this racket.

When young girls and boys make videos on Tiktok, they get acquainted to each other and join the Facebook group. An admin of the Facebook group was the main patroniser of the trafficking racket, police said.

"Around 700-800 Tiktok users took part in a pool party last year at a resort in the suburbs of Dhaka city, organised by Ridoy Babo," the official said.

This correspondent also found a promotional video of the pool party where at least 10 young female Tiktok users invited other users to join the party in mid-September last year.

Police said the gang members then targeted some female Tiktok users and later trafficked them to India in the name of providing well-paid jobs there at shopping malls and beauty parlours.

Police said Ridoy Babo coordinates the international trafficking ring.

Ridoy has more than 71,000

followers on his Tiktok account, in which he uploaded 696 videos.

Members of the gang, all aged between 20 and 25, had trafficked several other women earlier.

Police said there are more people involved in the racket and that they are trying to arrest the main perpetrators.

Meanwhile, police brought in four of Ridoy's "associates" into custody for questioning.

"Some criminals from the south-western region of Bangladesh and several Indian states are involved in the gang. Its network is stretched out to Dubai, UAE and some other countries in the Middle East," the DC said at the briefing.

"This racket takes girls to India through illegal means. The main place of this racket is in Bengaluru's Anandapura. During their stay in India, the victims are tortured, sexually assaulted and then photographed and recorded by the culprits. They are later forced into sex work."

The gang members blackmail the victims, threatening to send the photos and videos to their families or leak those on social media, in case the victims try to escape.

Police are investigating those involved in the crime and trying to bring back those arrested in India. All the Bangladeshis arrestees went to India illegally, the Tejgaon DC said.

Sri Lanka's economic plight a caution for Bangladesh

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borrowed amount of an ISB is settled at the bond maturity date at once; the repayment is not spread across years, as is the case with concessionary loans.

So, when an ISB matures, there is a big hit to a country's foreign currency reserves.

At the end of 2020, up to 50 percent of Sri Lanka's outstanding external debt was tied to ISBs, according to its central bank data.

This would not have been a problem had the Sri Lankan government the means to pay back, had it addressed the structural weakness in its economy when it started leaning heavily on commercial borrowings.

In 2019, Sri Lanka's tax-GDP ratio stood at 12.2 percent, which is not too better off than Bangladesh's at around 10 percent.

Its foreign direct investment figure hovers in the millions, whereas Bangladesh's is in the early billions.

Its \$88 billion-economy is heavily reliant on tourism and garment exports, leaving it at the mercy of external factors.

Bangladesh's solid foreign currency reserves are thanks to garment exports and remittance sent by unskilled workers, both heavily exposed to external shocks.

Sri Lanka has \$3.7 billion of foreign debt maturing this year and about \$4 billion of foreign currency reserves at the end of April, and hence the desperate scramble for dollars.

To make matters worse for Sri Lanka, global credit rating agencies unilaterally

downgraded its sovereign rating, so the option to issue more ISBs to service the ones maturing this year is off the table.

Fitch downgraded Sri Lanka's sovereign credit rating to "CCC" last year, indicating the country's chances of default "a real possibility".

Rival rating agency Moody's downgraded Sri Lanka to an equivalent level too.

"The problems that Sri Lanka and Pakistan are facing right now did not show up overnight," said Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute, a private think-tank.

So Bangladesh should watch closely how the crisis has unfolded in the two countries and take lessons from those.

In fiscal 2018-19, which is the latest available data from the Economic Relations Division, Bangladesh's foreign debt to GDP ratio stood at 14.7 percent, up from 13.2 percent in fiscal 2015-16.

While the ratio is well within the threshold go 40 percent, Bangladesh's foreign loan is on the uptick.

"When a car loses control uphill, it descends at an accelerating pace and can't do anything about it. We are not in that stage yet," said Mansur, a former economist of the International Monetary Fund.

Bangladesh is on course to becoming a middle-income country by 2024, so its window to concessionary funding will slam shut by 2027. This is another aspect the government needs to be mindful of.

As much as 84 percent of

Bangladesh's exports come from the shipment of garment items largely to developed nations in the west.

"We will be in trouble if we can't diversify our exports at the earliest. Just because of remittance our reserves are high and we are comfortable on the external front."

But remittance's spectacular current trend is not sustainable, Mansur said.

"Once people start to travel freely again, this trend will come crashing down and our foreign currency reserves will contract."

Bangladesh's domestic position is very uncomfortable: the government's debt servicing relative to revenue is high, according to Mansur, also the chairman of Brac Bank.

"Our capacity to pay cannot be assessed by way of GDP as the private sector is factored in that. Debt has to be paid by revenue and our revenue base is low. Our tax to GDP ratio is one of the worst in the world."

Mansur went on to urge the government not to borrow for every project.

"Save for very productive enterprises, the decision to borrow should be considered stringently. Borrowing does not make sense for each and every project," he said, while citing the Rooppur nuclear power plant as an example of a project that does not warrant borrowing.

But for projects like Padma bridge and Karnaphuli tunnel, borrowing is valid as those would be able to pay back their costs over their lifetime.

Israeli forces kill Palestinian in West Bank

AFP, Nablus

Israeli forces on Friday shot dead a Palestinian man during clashes in the occupied West Bank, the Palestinian health ministry said.

Zakaria Hamayel, 28, was struck by a bullet to the chest in the village of Beita, south of Nablus, during a protest against Israeli settlement expansion on Palestinian land, the ministry said.

The Israeli army said it was investigating the incident.

"We are aware of reports regarding a killed Palestinian. The cause of the injury is still unknown," it said in a statement.

It said a "violent riot" took place near the "Givat Eviatar outpost" and that "troops responded with riot dispersal means".

On Tuesday, Israeli forces killed a Palestinian man during a raid in the Al-Amari refugee camp near Ramallah.

Israeli forces have been carrying out arrests across the West Bank following violence that erupted around this month's 11-day conflict between Israel and Gaza's Islamist rulers Hamas.

An Egypt-brokered truce between Israel and Hamas came into effect a week ago.

More than 25 Palestinians have been killed in clashes since May 10 in the West Bank alone, where some 475,000 Israeli settlers live alongside around 2.8 million Palestinians.

The West Bank has been occupied by Israel since the 1967 Six-Day War.

US government seeks to dismiss suit against Trump

REUTERS, Washington

The US Justice Department on Friday asked a federal judge to dismiss a lawsuit filed against former President Donald Trump, former Attorney General William Barr and other officials over the forceful pushing back of peaceful protesters at a White House demonstration last year, the Washington Post reported.

Trump and other US officials should be considered immune from civil lawsuits over police actions taken to protect a president and to secure his movements, the Justice Department lawyers said, according to the Post.

The lawsuit was filed by the American Civil Liberties Union and other groups over the treatment of protesters at a demonstration against racism and police brutality on June 1, 2020, in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, in Minneapolis after a white police officer knelt on his neck for more than nine minutes.

Cops arrest six

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Ariyan, 18, Mohammad Saju, 20, Monowar Hossain, 24, Sohag, 25, and Saiful Islam, 40.

The magistrate also recorded the confessional statements of another accused Sumon Mia in the case.

The six accused were arrested last night around 11:00pm after police rescued the victim from the bus, said Inspector Ziaul Islam.

A patrol team of police became suspicious as a bus sped past them on Ashulia bypass road. The police team chased the bus and intercepted it after crossing Jahangirnagar University, the inspector added.

He further said that the police team rescued the victim and held all six accused then and there.

Later, the victim filed a rape case against the six yesterday morning, he further added.

Engineer sued

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over an environment-destructing coal power plant. People of Banshkhali imagine that Gandamara has been upon the tide of development but today people have really seen that Gandamara's inhabitants are being submerged by the tidal surge."

In the case statement, the engineer was accused of posing a security threat for the power plant by instigating locals and spreading propaganda and misinformation, sources said.

S Alam Group is installing the 1,224 megawatt coal-fired power plant -- the SS Power I Plant -- at Pashchim Gandamara.

It is a joint venture of six companies of S Alam Group (holding 70 percent of the equity), SEPCOIII Electric Power Construction Corporation, China and HTG Development Group Co Ltd, China, according to the official website of S Alam group.

At least seven workers were killed and another 18 were injured after a clash broke out between police and power plant workers on April 17.

After the incident police filed a case with Banshkhali Police Station accusing 2,500 unidentified people on charge of attacking law enforcers, while the power plant authorities lodged another case accusing 22 named and 1,040 unnamed people over setting vehicles on fire during the incident.