

BANGLADESH UPDATE

1,444
New cases in 24hrs

7,98,830
Total cases

12,583
Deaths

7,38,805
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

3,552,200
Deaths

170,825,918
Total cases

Allocation rising, service

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28,820 crore. In fiscal 2016-17, when the new pay scale was fully implemented, it was Tk 49,043 crore.

With the higher pay, it is natural to expect the quality of service to improve and corruption to moderate, said Ahmed, who has been in civil service for 37 years with spells in the finance ministry, housing and public works ministry, Rural Electrification Board, Prime Minister's Office and Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre.

"Corruption happens because of two reasons: need and greed. Greed can't be solved but need can be -- and that is what the government tried to address with the eighth pay scale."

And yet, corruption stayed as it is, said Ahmed, a former commissioner of the Anti-Corruption Commission.

Bangladesh slipped two notches in the Corruption Perceptions Index 2020, the flagship publication of Transparency International, to come ahead of only Afghanistan among the South Asian nations in tackling graft.

The country ranked 146th, which is 12th from the bottom. Bangladesh's score remained for the third time but the others improved theirs to leapfrog the country.

The government is in the civil administration's grip, said Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute, a private think-tank.

"They are living like lords on public's money. We are just not getting the service. Please tell me where the service quality has improved and bribing has subsided? So what was the point of the pay rise? There has been no improvement in efficiency or accountability -- it is all whitewash."

What is particularly grating is that for want of civil servants' will among civil servants, the development budget remains largely unused, said Mansur, a former economist of the International Monetary Fund.

The allocation for the annual development programme is invariably revised down generously towards

the end of the fiscal year to show a flattering implementation rate at the end of the year.

In fiscal 2019-20, the implementation of the revised ADP was 80.4 percent, according to data from the Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation Division. In fiscal 2015-16, when the new pay scale was implemented, it was 92.7 percent.

Many of the ongoing projects are set to expire next year and yet they are nowhere near completion.

As is often the case, project designs are never right; they need to be modified a few times, leading to delays and cost overruns.

There are also questions about the quality of the work that takes place.

Many of these issues can be improved if the finance ministry takes ownership of the ADP budget and gets backing from the Prime Minister's Office, according to Ahmed, a former secretary of the Internal Resources Division under the finance ministry.

"The project directors do not own the projects -- they are after fancy cars and foreign tours," he said, while calling for stronger monitoring of the projects.

Service quality, however, improved in areas where there has been automation.

"But during my time at NBR, I have seen resistance to automation."

For instance, the move to automate the value-added tax system began in 2013. That project is supposed to be completed next month, after multiple extensions.

"There is a nexus between tax officials and businessmen that is preventing full automation. And the businessmen are nowadays politicians too. There is a big principal-agent problem," Ahmed added.

In economics, the principal-agent problem is a conflict in priorities between a person or group and the representative authorised to act on their behalf. An agent may act in a way that is contrary to the best interests of the principal.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina speaking to Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury at the 32nd Parliament Secretariat Commission meeting held at the Jatiya Sangsad yesterday.

PHOTO: PTD

Brands off the hook from today

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For the past few weeks, global unions like IndustriALL have been stating that without the Accord, nothing can stop brands from buying from suppliers who are not compliant to the safety standards.

One of the Accord's main jobs was to inspect factories and make them structurally safe and compliant as per the international standards.

According to the Clean Clothes Campaign, the Accord has been working with over 1,600 factories, but the database shows that all have not completed the steps needed to make them fully compliant.

For example, as many as 130 factories working with Accord are yet to achieve even 50 percent of the remediation recommended to make them safe and compliant.

As many as 580 of Accord's factories have completed over 90 percent of the remediation.

On June 1, 2020, the RMG Sustainability Council (RSC) took over the Accord in Bangladesh with the mandate to continue with factory inspections, remediation monitoring, and workplace programmes.

"RSC is the successor of Accord in Bangladesh, and they can hold factories accountable. But with the RSC, there is no legal obligation for brands. Accord is legally binding, so the brands can be taken to court. No matter what we do locally, the brands need to be held accountable. Factories are safe only when brands can be held accountable," said Kalpona Akhter, president of the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation and founder of the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity.

Meanwhile, sources at the bodies related to the Accord said that they were being obliged to extend the contract by a further three months to give more time for the retailers to join.

On April 24, Ineke Zeldenrust, international coordinator at Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) said at a press briefing, "Negotiations are happening late because the brands requested so because of the pandemic and the unions agreed to it. We have been contacting brands to know about their position on key features."

Several brands issued statements stating their wish to opt for the RSC in the future.

Swedish retail giant H&M issued a statement saying, "When the transition Accord was signed in 2018, it was agreed by signatory brands and trade unions that after the agreement ends

in May 31, 2021, work will be handed over to a national regulatory body who would take over the work thereafter [i.e. RSC].

"This RSC adopted all Accord standards, compliance, protocols and articles. We are committed to supporting the RSC, to continue driving improvements in safety standards in the entire textile industry in Bangladesh, not only the factories producing for H&M Group."

Prominent global brand C&A said, "In January 2020, the Accord Steering Committee signed an agreement with the Bangladesh Garment Employers' Association [BGMEA] on the transition to RSC. The Transition Agreement outlines the principles and steps in the transition from the Accord to the RSC, which aims to bring together industry, brands, and trade unions to carry forward the significant workplace safety accomplishments made in Bangladesh."

It also said, "We still believe that if we want to be effective, we need to incorporate the Accord success story and learning into the RSC and we believe an agreement to do so is still possible and highly desirable."

However, another Swedish retail group Lindex stated, "In May 2020, the Bangladesh Supreme Court ruled that the foreign structure of the Accord could not be operationally maintained in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh Supreme Court effectively banned the Bangladesh Accord from working in Bangladesh."

"Therefore, a new structure was needed and the Accord operations in Bangladesh were transferred, with the support of the ILO, to the newly founded RSC. The Accord protocols, standards and resources have effectively transitioned into the RSC in 2020. We are committed to securing the independence, resources and financing of this organisation to secure workplace safety for all workers in Bangladesh now and into the future," said the group.

Meanwhile, a recent report published by CCC, Worker Rights Consortium, Maquila Solidarity Network and Global Labor Justice found that 12 leading brands who are currently signatories to the Accord are still sourcing from factories which have not finished remediation.

The report, titled "Unfinished Businesses: Outstanding safety hazards at garment factories show that the Accord must be extended and expanded" named brands Aldi Nord, Aldi Süd, Bestseller, C&A, H&M, Lidl,

Lindex, Loblaw, PVH, Varner Group, WE Fashion and Zeeman.

"Every brand included in this report is fully aware of the safety deficiencies at its factories in Bangladesh and receives regular reports on these from the Accord," said the report.

H&M for example was named for sourcing from 118 factories without safe exits, 159 factories without fire alarms and 163 factories without fire suppression systems.

In response, the brand said, "The numbers referred to in the report 'Unfinished business' do not mean that factories lack these safety mechanisms. It can refer to the fact that these mechanisms are in need of maintenance or do not have adequate size according to international safety standards. Some of the issues stated in the report have already been corrected, but due to lockdowns and fewer factory visits because of Covid-19, the Accord has not been able to verify these corrections."

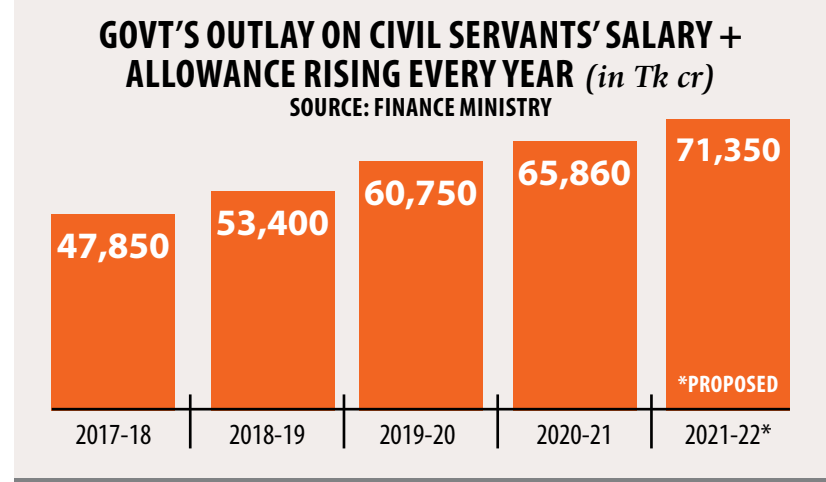
Bestseller was named in the report for sourcing from 70 factories without safe exits, and 90 factories without fire alarms.

In response, the brand stated, "Covid-19 has made it challenging for RSC personnel to officially verify improvements, as on-site visits have been suspended. Therefore much progress has not been officially recorded, and is therefore not reflected in these figures."

The Daily Star tried to contact BGMEA president Faruque Hassan yesterday for comments on the issue, but he did not respond to calls and text messages.

In a letter issued on April 29, he had said, "The BGMEA has the greatest respect for the global trade unions and their affiliates. At the same time we, from the industry side, strongly stand by the principles on which the RSC was founded."

"It is a national initiative with global standards. It is not going to be commanded by any external authority. The Accord expired in 2018 and there has been no accepted extension. We do not recognise the transition Accord and neither does the Government of Bangladesh, which will expire on 31 May, 2021. Any other extension or new Accord will similarly not be recognised and will not be a part of any initiative related to the safety Bangladesh is looking forward to. We like to point out that no organisation or authorities like Accord exist anywhere in the world where garments are manufactured."



Biman to look into high

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sufferings and financial burden of Saudi-bound migrant workers due to mandatory hotel bookings for quarantine, and post-arrival quarantine and pre-departure quarantine for South Korea bound passengers, added a source.

The respective secretaries of the Prime Ministers' Office, foreign ministry, expatriates' welfare ministry, health ministry, home ministry, civil aviation ministry, the chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh, and Biman Managing Director and CEO Dr Abu Saleh Mostafa Kamal, among others were present at the meeting.

The inter-ministerial meeting was held following the sufferings of Saudi-bound migrant workers following the issuance of a new travel advisory by the Saudi government that said Saudi-bound migrant workers who hadn't yet receive the Covid-19 vaccine would have to stay in seven days' institutional quarantine at designated hotels in the Gulf country.

The travel advisory came into effect from May 20.

A Saudi-bound worker needs to spend Tk 60,000 to Tk 70,000 to book a hotel room to quarantine in, a large financial burden for them. Failing to book hotel rooms, more than a thousand Saudi-bound migrant workers missed their flights in the past several days, workers alleged.

According to a meeting source, the Biman MD submitted a letter at the meeting mentioning various reasons for increasing airfares on various international routes.

The reasons included Biman's inability to carry passengers at full capacity due to restrictions for maintaining social distancing and the small number of passengers on most Dhaka-bound flights.

Despite these arguments, top officials of the expatriates' ministry pressured Biman to reduce exorbitant airfares to various Middle Eastern countries. At one stage, the Biman MD said they will look into the matter, a secretary who was present at the meeting told The Daily Star.

Regarding Covid-19 vaccination for outbound migrant workers, Ahmed Munirur Saleheen, secretary of the expatriates' welfare ministry, said the inter-ministerial meeting had instructed the health ministry to give vaccines to outbound migrant workers on a priority basis after vaccines become available in the country.

About giving cash assistance of up to Tk 25,000 to each Saudi-bound migrant worker from the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund, Saleheen added they will either provide the money to the respective airlines or to the bank accounts of the workers.

"After finalising the process, a circular in this regard will be issued soon," he also said.

106,000 Pfizer

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centres in the capital. Bangladesh is expected to receive 68 million doses of Covid vaccines from COVAX.

The Directorate General of Drug Administration (DGDA) on May 27 approved the emergency use of the Pfizer vaccine in the country.

Seeking anonymity, a health official told this newspaper that these vaccine doses will be administered mainly in the capital as most areas outside the city don't have the cold chain system needed to transport and store the vaccine.

"The Pfizer vaccine must be stored in minus 60-80 degrees Celsius," the official pointed out.

The vaccine produced by Pfizer Manufacturing Belgium NV is the fourth Covid-19 vaccine approved so far by the DGDA for emergency use in Bangladesh.

The other three are: Covishield produced by Serum Institute of India; Sputnik V manufactured by Genetec Joint Stock Company of Russia; and Sinopharm produced by Beijing Institute of Biological Products Co Ltd of China.

The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), the Vaccine Alliance (GAVI), and the World Health Organization are co-leads of the COVAX initiative for equitable global access to Covid-19 vaccines.

Campaign on action-oriented

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of South Korea, aiming to position P4G as a delivery mechanism to build back better and greener in this decade of action.

The second suggestion Sheikh Hasina placed is the need for a whole-of-world attitude in addition to a whole-of-society approach for achieving green growth and global goals 2030.

Placing the third suggestion, she said, "We, the participating leaders in the P4G Summit, need to work more closely towards a greener future for our next generation."

In the statement, the prime minister said Bangladesh's key focus is to promote locally-led adaptation solutions to address the adverse impact of climate change.

"As the chair of the Climate Vulnerable Forum-CVF and the host

to the South Asian office of Global Centre on Adaptation, Bangladesh's key focus is to uphold the interests of the climate vulnerable countries and promote locally-led adaptation solutions," she said.

The prime minister said water, an area of work for P4G, is one of the most valuable assets of Bangladesh. "So, we've adopted a 100-year sustainable development plan styled as Delta Plan 2100 that focuses on efficient use and preservation of water."

She said Bangladesh is the first LDC to establish a "Climate Change Trust Fund" from its own resources. "Every year we spend about 5 billion US dollars on climate adaptation and mitigation measures."

Bangladesh, a member of the P4G, pursues a low carbon development path. "Our National Solar Energy Action Plan 2021-2041 predicts

generation of up to 40 Giga Watt of renewable energy by 2041," she added.

Sheikh Hasina said Bangladesh, the second largest exporter of readymade garments, is exploring efficient options of circular fashion and textiles as part of the overall circular economy.

"Despite the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic with its many challenges, we've the opportunity to build back better through inclusive green recovery and green growth," she said.

The second P4G summit is expected to culminate in the adoption of the Seoul Declaration, and will serve as a stepping stone towards the Glasgow Climate Change Conference (COP 26).

The P4G global initiative was launched in 2017 to accelerate the response to climate change and implementation of the SDGs.

Mango gets in the way in 7 districts

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moment... The mango trade involves crores of taka and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people."

He claimed the coronavirus situation was not yet alarming and said they would prefer lives before livelihoods only when they think the situation is beyond control.

Contacted, Habibul Ahsan Talukhder, Rajshahi divisional director of the DGHS, said, "The number of coronavirus patients requiring hospitalisation is still bearable though the number of infections is high."

He said lockdown was the best solution but it would make things tough for most people who need to go out and work to earn a living.

According to reports from two RT-PCR laboratories in Rajshahi, the infection rate in the region was 43 percent yesterday as the results of 190 out of 435 samples came positive.

The strict lockdown in Chapainawabganj, which saw a surge in Covid cases over the last few days, ends today. At least seven cases of the Indian Covid variant have been detected so far in the district. But none

of the infected people visited India.

First detected on May 8 in the country, a total of 20 cases of the Indian variant have been found in 10 districts most of which share border with India.

Yesterday, the Covid positivity rate was 34 percent in Chapainawabganj.

"Lockdown means loss for everyone. Nobody wants it. We will sit to discuss the situation tomorrow [today]," said Dr Zahid Nazrul Chowdhury, civil surgeon in the district.

[Amanur Aman from Kushtia and Dipankar Roy from Khulna contributed to this report]

Illegal border crossings going on in 6 districts

AMANUR AMAN, Kushtia

Amid the closure of Indo-Bangla land borders, Bangladeshi nationals are trespassing using several illegal points in six districts of the south.

The districts are Satkhira, Jashore, Jhenidah, Kushtia, Meherpur, and Chuadanga.

Multiple trafficking rackets are assisting people to travel between Bangladesh and India through these points, eventually increasing health risks in the areas, said sources.

Contacted, Lt Col Kamrul Hasan, director of 58th battalion of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), said some people crossed the border from India amid the closure as they had no other way to return.

"Since they have gone to India illegally, they have returned illegally," he said.

According to the BGB official, all these trespassers are general people and used to travel to the neighbouring country for visiting their relatives.

Some of them also used to work there as labourers, he added.

Lt Col Khalekuzzaman, director of 6th BGB battalion in Chuadanga, said their troops regularly patrol the borders to prevent trespassing from India. However, since the borders are fenceless, some people take opportunity to enter the country.

A total of 725 Bangladeshi citizens returned through Darshana frontier from May 17, he said, adding that the returnees were sent on quarantine and isolation.

Like them many others have returned without any test for coronavirus, he added.

According to sources, maximum trespassing take place through Benipur and Dhopakali villages in Chuadanga's Jibannagar upazila; and Matila, Laraihat, Samanta and Khoshalpur villages in Jhenidah Maheshpur.

34 more die

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in this period. The total number of recoveries now stands at 738,805 and the recovery rate at 92.48 percent.

Among the 34 dead, 23 were men and 11 women.

Of them one aged between 21-30 years, two between 31 and 40, five between 41 and 50, five between 51 and 60, and 21 were above 60 years, added the release.

Iran confirms spying, propaganda charges against French detainee

AFP, Tehran

Iranian prosecutors have confirmed a French man detained in the Islamic republic will be tried for espionage and "propaganda against the system", his lawyer told AFP yesterday.

Benjamin Briere, born in 1985, was arrested in Iran in May 2020, allegedly while flying a drone and taking photographs in a prohibited area.

Espionage is punishable by death in Iran, while the charge of "propaganda against the system" can incur a prison sentence of three months to one year.

Lawyer Said Dehghan, who also represents another French national held in the country, told AFP the investigation had been completed and the prosecution had confirmed the charges.

"The prosecutor is preparing the indictment and sending it to the revolutionary court for the continuation of the judicial process," Dehghan said.

Briere, who is being held in the city of Mashhad in northeastern Iran, was also facing charges of "corruption on earth", one of the most serious offences under Iranian law, and drinking alcohol, punishable by flogging, but those charges were dismissed after the investigation.

The announcement comes days after an open letter from Briere's sister, Blandine Briere, was published by French weekly Le Point, in which she appealed to French President Emmanuel Macron to push for her brother's release.

She said the charges were "baseless" and that Briere had become a "negotiating tool".

In March, a spokesman for the French foreign ministry said Briere was benefiting from consular support and that its embassy in Tehran was in "regular contact" with him.

Arrests of foreigners in Iran -- especially dual nationals, who are often accused of espionage -- have multiplied since former US president Donald Trump in 2018 unilaterally withdrew the United States from a nuclear deal with Iran and reimposed harsh sanctions against Tehran.

Iran has conducted several exchanges of foreign prisoners, including researchers, with countries holding Iranian nationals.