

BANGLADESH UPDATE



1,447
New cases in 24hrs



8,09,370
Total cases



12,801
Deaths



7,49,725
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE



3,732,688
Deaths



173,552,775
Total cases

PM calls for massive tree plantation to save environment

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday urged the people to go for massive plantation of trees to protect the country from the adverse impacts of climate change.

She was inaugurating the National Tree Plantation Campaign-2021 marking the World Environment Day.

"We will have to protect the environment. This country is ours. If we want to protect the country from the adverse impacts of climate changes, we will have to promote greenery further in this green Bengal [Sabuj Bangla]," the PM said.

Hasina launched the campaign by planting saplings at the Gono Bhaban.

Noting that she planted saplings, the premier called upon the people to plant trees in whatever places available there.

"Plant at least one sapling. But it would be best if you can plant three saplings. I want you to plant three saplings -- one for fruit, one for timber and one herbal."

Environment, Forest and Climate



Change Minister Md Shahab Uddin and Deputy Minister Habibun Nahar were present on the occasion.

This year, the National Tree Plantation Campaign is being observed with the theme "Mujib Borshe Angikar Kori, Sonar Bangla Sabuj Kori" aimed at motivating the people to make Bangladesh even greener in the Mujib Year.

The World Environment Day was observed across the world yesterday, with the theme "Ecosystem Restoration".

Hasina said Bangladesh has achieved remarkable success in afforestation as it has increased forest coverage to 22 percent, thanks to different measures taken by the government.

She mentioned that trees not only protect the environment, but also provide financial solvency and other benefits to the people.

The PM also called upon the people to take proper care of trees. "Only planting saplings is not enough. You'll have to take care of these as well."

China blasts US and EU consulates in Hong Kong for Tiananmen candles

AFP, Hong Kong

China yesterday berated the US and EU consulates in Hong Kong for displaying candles to commemorate the June 4 Tiananmen crackdown, slamming it as a "clumsy practical show" to destabilise the city.

Candles were seen lit in the windows of the US consulate building, which is next to the residence of Hong Kong's Beijing-appointed leader Carrie Lam, and the European Union's office on Friday night.

The missions also posted

photographs of their candlelit Tiananmen memorials on social media.

"Any attempt to exploit Hong Kong to carry out infiltration or sabotage activities against the mainland crosses the red line... is absolutely intolerable," a spokesperson for the Hong Kong office of China's foreign ministry said.

"We again urge the organs of relevant countries in Hong Kong to immediately stop meddling with Hong Kong affairs and China's internal affairs at large, and avoid playing with fire."

TIB slams hints at continuing the scope

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without facing any questions on the source of the funds. This opening is due to close at the end of the current fiscal year on June 30.

"We want to believe that the budget is a financial document of integrated thinking made under the direction of the top level of the government including the finance minister and the ministry," said Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of TIB.

But the finance minister's scepticism about one of its budget decisions just a day after it was placed in the parliament is surprising.

Though the minister in his post-budget briefing claimed that the decision has been taken not to continue the opportunity of legalising black money on the basis of justice and fairness, he could not clearly tell under whose pressure or which group's interest he cannot stand firm on that decision.

TIB hopes that the minister would move away from such a reckless decision and show good sense and would give a strict message to the corrupts by not continuing such corruption-friendly, discriminatory and unconstitutional offer, the statement said.

Iftekharuzzaman went on to criticise Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal's defence of lack of information for his earlier statement on continued amnesty as long as undeclared wealth exists.

"Such explanation is not expected from a responsible person like the minister."

From the beginning, there was an attempt to show off record legalisation of more than Tk 14,000 crore in the first ten months of the fiscal for the added leniency to black money holders, Iftekharuzzaman said.

"The fear is that he is now trying to use that shield in favour of the unjust advantage, which cannot be expected. But it is not being considered about how much revenue loss the government has incurred through this."

The scope to legalising black money without raising any question from any authority is not only questioning the government's 'zero-tolerance against corruption' position but also contributing to creating a corruption-friendly environment, he said.

He also urged the government to nullify the other existing scope of legalising black money under income tax ordinance.

Budget reflects no concern

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development budget for transport and communication, 11.5 for energy and power, 15.1 percent for local government and rural development, 19.7 percent for education and technology, 5.6 percent for agriculture, 6.6 percent for health, 6.4 percent for public administration and three percent for social security.

The government, for the fifth time now, has prepared a separate climate budget report, which shows that a lot of the government-allocated money went to 25 ministries that conduct different development programmes.

It said the cumulative budget allocation of these 25 ministries accounts for 57.33 percent of the total national budget of FY2021-22.

Of that, 7.26 percent is climate relevant.

While World Environmental Day was observed just yesterday, two days after the proposed budget was announced, Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal did not seem to mention the ecosystem or the restoration of our degraded environment in his speech delivered on Thursday.

He only said that 16 round-the-clock air monitoring centres are being set up around the country out of concern over air pollution.

determine the air quality for the air quality index, which is published on a daily basis, he said.

Dhaka has consistently been listed as one of the countries with the worst air for years.

Besides, the minister talked about use of hollow block to reduce the air pollution.

Regarding noise pollution, he said, "The Bangladesh Secretariat area has been declared a horn-free zone."

Sharif Jamil, secretary general, Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (Bapa), said, "The government generally ignores whenever environmentalists demand anything to protect the environment."

He added that it should take measures to curb water and air pollution and to save forests and wildlife.

"We do not see any visible government measures in this regard."

Asked Mustafizur Rahman, a distinguished fellow of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, told The Daily Star the government should focus on protection of the environment and the restoration of the ecosystem, as it is now linked also with foreign trade.

"Bangladesh is now graduating from LDC. Other countries will want to know whether products made in Bangladesh were produced in a sustainable environment or not."

The European Union has already raised questions about pollution caused by the tannery industry.



Firefighters at work after a fire broke out at Rupayan Karim Tower in the capital's Kakrail area around 3:00pm yesterday. It took six fire engines and nearly half an hour to douse the fire.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

2 Rohingyas killed in landslides

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

Two Rohingyas were killed in two incidents of landslides in refugee camps of Ukhiya and Teknaf upazilas yesterday. The deceased are Rafique Allah, 32, a resident of Moynarghona camp-12 of Ukhiya, and Noor Hasina, 20, who lived in camp-21 in Whykong union of Teknaf upazila.

A portion of hill collapsed on Noor Hasina around 10:00am in the morning following heavy downpour in the Chakmarkool Rohingya Camp.

On information, members of the Armed Police Battalion (APBn) rescued her and took her to a nearby hospital, where on-duty doctors declared her dead.

Rafique went to dig soil in a nearby hill around 1:00pm when there was heavy rain. At that time, he was buried alive as a portion of the hill fell on him.

On information, APBn members rushed to the spot and recovered the body, said Khandaker Ashfaquzzaman, additional superintendent of APBn-8 in Cox's Bazar.

Contacted, Mohammad Naimul Haque, superintendent of APBn-14, said the bodies would be handed to the relatives after completion of formalities.

It may soon hit the heartland

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and Chuadanga were not that serious the previous week, shows the weekly analysis.

The situation in 36 other districts is also alarming as the positivity rate in each district is 10 percent or above.

Under these circumstances, experts have warned that the Covid situation in those districts might worsen further after a week or two as public movement have increased following the resumption of inter-district vehicle movement on May 24.

They warned that the surge in infection will reach the heartland of the country soon.

The fear stemmed from the fact that the overall positivity rate across the country was 11.03 percent yesterday. It was the highest in the last 33 days.

According to the DGHS analysis, the positivity rate was between 20 and 29 percent in 10 districts throughout last week until Thursday. The rate was between 10 and 19 percent in 26 and below 10 in 22 districts, including Dhaka.

Institute of Epidemiology Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) says districts with positive rates of 10 percent and above are considered "high risk" zones, while those with 5-9 percent "medium risk" zones and those below five percent "low risk" zones.

HOSPITALS OVERBURDENED
The number of patients in hospitals in the six districts -- Chapainawabganj, Satkhira, Chuadanga, Rajshahi, Noakhali, and Bagerhat -- has been on the rise.

With no or limited capacity to treat critical Covid-19 patients, the hospital authorities in the border districts referred such patients to medical college hospitals in Rajshahi, Khulna and Satkhira.

In the 250-bed Chapainawabganj Sadar Hospital, the Covid unit has no ICU facility. It can't treat patients requiring oxygen more than 20 litres per minute.

So, the hospital authorities every day have to refer one or two critical patients to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital 70km away, said doctors there.

Chapainawabganj reported 55 percent positivity rate on Friday.

In the past 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday, 43 Covid-19 patients died. Of those, the highest 12 were in Rajshahi division while five were in Khulna, shows DGHS data.

The number of deaths in Rajshahi and Khulna has been on the rise for last two weeks.

In the past 13 days, 101 patients died in the Covid-19 unit of Rajshahi Medical College Hospital, said hospital sources.

The RMCH authorities have added another ward to the 232-bed Covid-19 unit to tackle the high number of patients coming in.

Noakhali Civil Surgeon Masum Iftekhar said they arranged a makeshift hospital in a stadium in the Noakhali municipality area for coronavirus patients as their number was going up.

"Ten days ago, we had 20 patients daily on an average. The number has now gone up to 30. If the transmission continues, people from nearby districts might come here seeking treatment," he said.

To put the brakes on increasing number of Covid cases, the Noakhali district administration has put the municipality areas and six nearby unions under lockdown from 6:00am yesterday to 12:00pm on June 12.

"TRANSMISSION MAY SPIKE"
Experts have warned of another spike

in Covid cases after a week or two due to the withdrawal of movement restriction and people's reluctance to adhere to the health safety guidelines.

"It seems that after a week the condition of the entire country will turn the same as that of the border districts. It is worrisome. We should activate movement restrictions immediately. Otherwise, we might lose many lives," Mahbuba Zamil, head of virology at the Institute of Public Health, told The Daily Star yesterday.

She said the previous spike in April and May was tamed after restrictions were imposed on inter-district transport for a month since April 5.

"People left and returned Dhaka over the Eid. So the transmission continued. Since there is no restrictions in place now, the transmission rates are likely to go up again," she said.

She also said the transmission rate in Dhaka was now stable, but it may spike soon.

Echoing her statement, Mushtuq Hussain, a consultant of the IEDCR, said the Delta variant may be responsible for the recent spike in cases.

He said many returned from India with the variant and managed to go to different districts dodging law enforcers' surveillance.

"If strict measures are not taken, the situation in other districts, including the capital, might turn the same as in the border districts. It may happen in a week or two," he said.

IS DELTA VARIANT RESPONSIBLE?

A study published by the IEDCR on Thursday suggested that the Delta variant, popularly known as the Indian variant, was spreading at the community level.

Since the first case of the Indian variant was detected in the country on

May 8, the IEDCR and the Institute for Developing Science and Health Initiatives (ideSHi) have completed genome sequencing of 50 samples of coronavirus.

Among the Delta variant infected patients, 14 had not gone abroad and did not come in contact with people with travel history, which indicates that the community transmission of Delta variant exists in Bangladesh.

Mahbuba Zamil said, "After we had the UK variant, we imposed restrictions on movement and the transmission came down. The Indian variant is a threat, but it can also be checked if some measures are taken."

Mushtuq Hussain said the same.

The country reported the second wave of Covid in the second week of March. After the government imposed movement restrictions from April 5, the transmission started going down steadily. The positivity rate reached the lowest -- seven percent -- in mid-May.

With restrictions eased, the transmission started rising again from the third week of May.

Positivity rate

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The new cases were detected after testing 13,115 samples.

In the 24 hours, Dhaka and Rajshahi divisions saw the highest fatalities with 12 deaths each while Chattogram division witnessed eight deaths, Khulna five, Rangpur three, Mymensingh two and Sylhet one.

However, 749,425 patients have recovered so far, keeping the country's recovery rate at 92.60 percent.

Bangladesh reported its first Covid cases on March 8 last year and the first death on the 18th of that month.

Lives and livelihood disregarded

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Development showed that 2.45 crore fell into poverty even before the second wave of the pandemic hit.

It is quite a sizeable figure by all accounts, and yet in his budget speech in the parliament on Thursday, Kamal maintained "the poverty situation in Bangladesh did not worsen to a scale of catastrophe during the pandemic".

While he did state that the government was taking effective and conscious steps to address the potential impact of the recent second wave of coronavirus cases on the country's poverty situation, the absence of any details was glaring.

There was neither a big jump in allocation for social safety net allocation nor a separate fund for the new poor, as in this fiscal year -- when the government very much had the means to do more.

Social safety net schemes got Tk 107,610 crore in the upcoming fiscal year, which is up 12 percent year-on-year but lower than the average 17.7 percent growth of allocation between fiscals 2009-10 and 2020-21.

Fiscal 2021-22's safety net allocation is 3.1 percent of GDP, up from 3 percent this year. Paltry, by all measures.

Other than the ongoing safety net schemes, there has been a one-off transfer of Tk 2,500 to 35 lakh low-income households during the first wave of the pandemic last year. That transfer took place this year, too, ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr.

Pray, tell how much of a help is Tk 2,500 in this day and age to a family battling a loss of livelihood and savings? Not much.

And yet, the government is expecting the poverty rate would come down to 12.3 percent and the extreme poverty rate to 4.5 percent by 2023-2024, as Kamal indicated in his budget speech, which seemed divorced from the tribulations of people from the hinterlands.

Most of the new poor used to draw their livelihoods from the informal economy, which is the undeniable

casualty of the draconian measures enforced whenever the test positivity rate went up.

The only way to ensure no further lockdowns are needed is by ramping up the vaccination programme, and here too Kamal's assured stride was not seen.

"We will be able to overcome the ongoing crisis of the second wave through mass vaccination," he said in his budget speech.

He mentions that there is a plan to vaccinate 80 percent of the people in phases. But, by when? The only clue he gives is: 25 lakh vaccines a month, meaning the country would continue to be under the shadow of Covid-19 for the foreseeable future.

In other words, he is not safeguarding the livelihood for the demographic into the near future.

Besides, save for the odd projects here and there to construct upazila complex buildings or village roads, there was nothing in the budget document to suggest he gave much thought to save or create jobs -- at present.

While his offers of tax holiday under the 'Made in Bangladesh' initiative and exemption of value-added tax at the local manufacturing stage for certain home and kitchen appliances and light engineering products are laudable, none of it would create jobs now -- which is the need of the hour.

Nor was there any incentive for businesses for retaining jobs, as was the case in much of the Western world.

By and large, Kamal came across as a neoconservative enthusiast, crossing his fingers and hoping the private sector would take care of the problem -- in return for the crumbs of tax cuts he threw its way.

However, history and Keynesian economics suggest it is by spending that one can get out of a recession.

The logic goes that in a recession, income declines because spending declines, and spending declines because income declines. It is a vicious

circle that needs to be broken.

One option might be tax cuts to increase business spending, and another is to have government spending make up the slack.

Most recently, Japan was able to come out of its 20-year-long recession thanks to the massive spending needed to rebuild its coastal towns in the aftermath of the tsunami in 2011.

If ever there was a time to toss fiscal responsibility aside and implement a plan to "spend, spend, spend", this was it.

And given the deft macroeconomic management under the Awami League government, Bangladesh's conservative debt-GDP ratio and eagerness of development partners to come forward with funds, the government certainly has the wherewithal to go all out.

But Kamal held back and came up with a budget that was neither here nor there.

At around 17.5 percent of the GDP, the budget for fiscal 2021-22 was even lower than its South Asian neighbours, who are not in as comfortable a position as Bangladesh is from a fiscal viewpoint.

"Our focus will be on increasing consumption and investment to stimulate domestic demand," he said.

How is he going to increase consumption when he has kept the income tax structure unchanged in the incoming fiscal year?

The corporate tax cut of 2.5 percentage points, while a longstanding demand of the private sector, is unlikely to spur job creation of the scale needed.

In the absence of any improvement in the ease of doing business, it is unlikely that investment will spring to the level Kamal is expecting.

While he has come short on saving livelihoods, he has also disappointed on the saving lives front.

The health budget increased 12 percent year-on-year, which is lower than the allocation growth of 14

percent between fiscals 2010-11 and 2020-21.

In other words, in the thick of the pandemic, the government did not feel the need to raise its spending on this neglected but crucial sector.

This is particularly concerning given that the Indian variant, which poses a higher risk of hospitalisation and transmission, is very much in Bangladesh.

Were it to run amok as it did in the neighbouring country, whose health infrastructure is a notch above Bangladesh's, the country can be brought down to its knees.

Education was another sector Kamal earmarked as a priority sector in his speech. But once again, his actions failed to live up to his lofty proclamations.

Seeing that about 4 crore students would not be getting back to the classrooms anytime soon, the education budget needed to increase by more than the 8.7 percent he has managed for the incoming fiscal year.

Many still cannot attend the virtual lessons for want of equipment and are subsequently dropping out of the system. And even if classes start physically, there need to be more sessions to give the same lesson to maintain the social distancing rule.

In short, massive investment is needed, but the government's expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP continues to hover around the 2 percent-mark for more than a decade now.

This is woeful for a country where about 45 percent of the population is below the age of 24.

And it is particularly unexpected in a budget that felt was designed for too far into the future and not for addressing the needs of the present.

"The main impetus of our economic activities is our people," he said.

Alas, he seems to have placed them on the curbside during his budget exercise.