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"We will look into this issue [treatment of Covid-19 patients] so that they [private healthcare facilities] cannot overcharge."
HEALTH MINISTER ZAHID MALEQUE



"I appeal to states that they should use the lockdown as the last resort. Our focus should be micro-containment zones."
INDIAN PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI ON COVID-19



"We still don't know for sure when and where we will get vaccines... We're just hearing the words of hope over vaccines."
DEPUTY OPPOSITION LEADER GM QUADER ABOUT PROCUREMENT OF COVID-19 VACCINES

PVT HOSPITALS TREATING COVID PATIENTS

They charge at will

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN and ZYMA ISLAM

Desperate and discomfited, they would arrive at the doors of private hospitals to get treatment for Covid-19.

And the private hospitals, it appears, have taken to charging customers as they wish -- in the absence of a price guideline for Covid-19 treatment.

It is not that the government is not aware of the gulf in billing: a recent study by the health ministry's Health Economics Unit (HEU) and the Dhaka University's department of economics found that the cost of Covid-19 treatment in private hospitals is double that of public hospitals.

This begs the question: why has the Directorate General of Health Services not come up with a guideline 16 months into the public health crisis?

The Daily Star inspected the hospital bills from 10 private hospitals in Dhaka of 30 Covid-19 patients and found no consistency in the charges.

Take the case of two critically ill elderly patients with pre-existing health conditions, who found themselves at the intensive care units of two private hospitals of the same tier at the same time when their lungs were failing them.

One of them, whose kidneys were vastly compromised, was admitted to Dhanmondi General and Kidney Hospital on Green Road, where he was on constant dialysis for the six days he was there.

The other, with hypertension, was

PRIVATE HOSPITALS AT A GLANCE

- No pricing guideline from DGHS
- Account for **63%** of hospital beds
- And majority of ICU beds
- Began mushrooming from **80s**
- **\$6b** annual industry, **25%** growth

admitted a few feet away at New Life Hospital, where he stayed for five days.

One would have thought that the patient with hypertension would have a lower medical bill. But it turned out to be the opposite.

The total bill of the hypertensive patient was Tk 196,000 and the renal patient's Tk 145,450.

Medication costs were excluded from the comparison because doctors said the patient with renal problems received less medication because her failing kidneys would not have been able to process them.

The main difference in cost between the two patients is the charge made for specific machinery: a syringe pump.

The cardiac patient was charged Tk 24,000 for a syringe pump and the renal patient Tk 14,400.

For oxygen, the renal patient was charged Tk 23,000 less than the cardiac patient even though the former's oxygen

RELATED STORY ON P2

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The morning light shows the devastation at the Mohakhali Sattola slum in the capital. There were smoldering fires and firefighters and locals were trying to put those out. The fire broke out around 4:00am and could not be brought under control before 7:00am. By then over 500 shanties had been destroyed. Story on page 3.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

SUPPLEMENTARY BUDGET Passed amid uproar over graft

REJAUL KARIM BYRON and MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR

Baffling -- is how one would describe the parliamentary session in which the Tk 13,987.3 crore supplementary budget for fiscal 2020-21 was passed.

All sorts of questions were asked of the finance minister save for the most exigent one.

In a fiscal year like no other, one in which lives and livelihoods were upended like never before, spending by the government -- and that too with an open hand -- was much needed.

And yet there was nary a question on how much of the Tk 568,000 crore budget that Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal had arranged for the current fiscal year was actually spent.

Not much -- would have been the answer.

In the first nine months, Tk 225,588 crore was spent, meaning it could not even spend half of the budget with three-fourths the fiscal year gone.

Not just that, there was no question asked of the finance minister of the poor implementation when the circumstances demanded the opposite from him.

The budget that is drafted every year in June tends to be based on estimates. So by the time the revised budget is made, the finance ministry has a better feel of the economy.

Which is why it was so necessary that the finance minister was grilled at the session yesterday.

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TACKLING GRAFT, PANDEMIC

MPs rap the health ministry for failure

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Opposition lawmakers yesterday came down heavily on the health ministry for its failure to curb corruption and ensure healthcare for people amid the Covid pandemic.

They also sought increased budgetary allocation for the health sector and its proper utilisation.

The MPs were taking part in a discussion in the Jatiya Sangsad on the supplementary budget for fiscal 2020-21.

GM Quader, deputy leader of the opposition, said people hear only words of hope from the government over securing Covid vaccines.

"We still don't know for sure when we will get more vaccines... We're just hearing words of hope over vaccines through news reports."

Quader, also chairman of the Jatiya Party, further said the finance minister in his budget speech mentioned that the government took measures to bring 80 percent of the population under vaccination coverage and some 25 lakh vaccine jabs will be administered a month.

"If so, three crore vaccine jabs can be administered a year. And it will take five years for administering one dose of vaccine to the

entire population and 10 years for two doses."

About the health sector, Quader said only 0.83 percent of the GDP has been allocated for the health sector in the proposed budget for the next fiscal year, but the World Health Organisation suggested it should be 4 to 5 percent of the GDP.

"We should have allocated at least 2 percent of the GDP for the health sector amid this pandemic."

Moreover, the funds allocated for the sector are being misused because of corruption. But no one gets punished for the irregularities, he said.

BNP lawmaker Harunur Rashid said the health ministry's procurement process has turned into a big source of corruption. The health minister should clarify what reforms will be carried out in the ministry.

A committee should be formed to pull the ministry out of this situation, he suggested.

Rashid pointed out that many district-level public hospitals are facing a shortage of physicians and technicians while those in the capital have more than one doctor against each post.

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Liberation came riding on six-point demand: PM

Bss, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said the country's independence was achieved on the basis of the six-point formula, the "Charter of Freedom" for Bangladesh, and reiterated her pledge to build Bangladesh as a developed and prosperous country.

"... He [Bangabandhu] would always tell us that six points were basically one point that means independence. Now, we are

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Govt plans free Covid tests in north

Temporary move aims to encourage testing, get real picture of transmission

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

The government is planning to waive coronavirus testing fee in the northern districts so that more people are tested during the ongoing surge in positivity rates, which are especially high in those regions.

Officials said instructions were given in this regard to get the real picture of the transmission in the northern districts. On Saturday, the health ministry in a meeting with divisional and district administrative officials, including civil surgeons of Rajshahi, Rangpur, Khulna, Chattogram and Sylhet devised the strategy to encourage people to do Covid-19 tests.

According to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) daily bulletin, the daily Covid-19 positivity rate in Rajshahi division was over 25 percent while it was over 23 percent in Rangpur division yesterday. The countrywide positivity rate yesterday was 11.47 percent.

"Northern divisions and districts officials said as there is a large number of low-income people in that region, people are reluctant to do the test. If the cost of the Covid test is waived, people will be encouraged.

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Harassment of Rozina slammed in parliament

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Opposition lawmakers lambasted the health ministry officials for harassing and torturing Prothom Alo's Senior Correspondent Rozina Islam while she was performing her duties.

Such attacks on Rozina, who wrote several in-depth reports on corruption in the health sector during the pandemic, has undermined the image of Bangladesh before the world, they said.

The MPs made the comments while taking part in the discussion on the supplementary budget and cut motion of supplementary budget for fiscal 2020-21 at the parliament yesterday.

Many are not punished even after indulging in large scale corruption. But those who are highlighting corruption are facing various problems. A few days ago, a journalist was harassed in various ways, said Deputy Opposition Leader GM Quader.

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Three boys check each other's burflowers (popularly known as kadam) plucked from nearby trees in Jharjaritola of Barishal Sadar upazila yesterday. These flowers usually bloom when there is plenty of rain.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

Hefajat declares committee 'under watch'

'Non-members' seen at briefing; Mamunul dropped

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Hefajat's new committee does not include Mamunul Haque and other leaders who are involved with different political parties or are in jail on charges of being involved in the violence in late March.

Hefajat-e-Islam's new Secretary General Nurul Islam Jihadi at a press conference yesterday announced that Junayed Babunagari continues to be the amir of the Islamist organisation.

The press conference was held at a madrasa in the capital's Khilgaon.

A group of people, whom Hefajat leaders discreetly identified as not their members, were seen busy organising the press briefing. They offered chairs for the reporters and distributed press releases. Interestingly, they offered journalists envelopes containing money. The Daily Star correspondent humbly turned down the offer.

Since early morning yesterday, the presence of intelligence officials inside and outside the madrasa was notable.

The men from the intelligence agencies were seen assisting the organisers and the media like volunteers throughout the event.

Asked about it, Nurul Islam told a few reporters afterwards that the government and the intelligence agencies were "watching how we announce the committee".

The new central committee has 33 members, an advisory committee 16 members and another committee called Majlish-e-Sura nine members.

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