

BANGLADESH UPDATE



2,537
New cases in 24hrs



8,17,819
Total cases



12,949
Deaths



7,57,569
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE



3,771,624
Deaths



174,966,773
Total cases

Mystery shrouds deaths of 2 children in school

Parents of one say school to blame

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bandarban

The family of one of the two boys, who died after falling into a drainage pipe in their school, have accused the school authorities of negligence in duty in a case filed on Tuesday.

Abdul Quader Jilani, 12, and Mostafizur Rahman, 13, who were in sixth grade at Quantum Cosmo School and College in Lama, Bandarban, died on Monday, said acting headteacher Shariful Alam.

The school reopened about two months ago amid the pandemic with permission from the education ministry.

Mizanur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Lama Police Station, said, "It has to be thoroughly investigated how two sixth grader boys can die in a 13 inch pipe."

Mostafizur's father Bulbul Mostafiz told The Daily Star that corporal punishment was rampant in the school and he often saw bruises on his son's body after he came home from school.

"They [school authorities] are saying that the incident happened around 12:30pm on Monday, but they informed us at 3:30pm," Mostafiz said.

Contacted, acting headteacher Shariful said the allegations were baseless.

The boys were playing in the rain on Monday around 11:30am on the school playground when they fell into a nearby drainage pipe, he said.

"Abdul Quader was rescued around 12:30pm and Mostafizur around 1:10pm," he added.

They were taken to Lohagara Upazila Health Complex where doctors pronounced them dead around 2:30pm.

Sub-inspector Aminul Islam Bhuiyan of the nearby Kayajui Para Police Outpost, said, "We were informed about the incident around 12:30pm... One of

the two students was already taken to Lohagara Upazila Health Complex by the time I reached there.

"I also did not see the other student as I was far from the spot from where he was found," he said.

Inspector Md Alamgir of Lama Police Station said, "There were some injury marks on different parts of their bodies. The cause of their death will be known after an autopsy."

Lama Upazila Nirbahi Officer Reza Rashid said, "Quantum school authorities did not tell us anything about the deaths. We will ask them why they hid the information and hold them accountable."

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, educational institutions across the country have been closed since March 17, 2020.

"We started the residential activities of the school about two months ago with the approval from the Ministry of Education," said Shariful.

Mohammad Ismat Ullah, who is mentioned as the senior assistant secretary in the secondary and higher education division at the education ministry in the copy of the approval, told the Daily Star, "I gave the approval on the instructions of the education minister."

The website of the Ministry of Education mentions Mohammad Ismat Ullah as the Deputy Secretary (Adjustment) of secondary and higher secondary division. This correspondent could not reach Education Minister Dipu Moni over the phone.

"The Ministry of Education has not informed us about this approval," Bandarban District Education Officer Sarit Kumar Chakma told the Daily Star.

On January 1, 2020, police recovered a hanging body of a class IX student from Quantum Cosmo School and College.

Stimulus schemes hardly

FROM PAGE 1

Many beauticians who are, or were forced to become, self-employed small entrepreneurs, have been struggling to survive during the pandemic that took the glow off the beauty business, declared an industrial sector by the government last June.

RELUCTANT TO APPLY FOR LOANS, ALSO UNAWARE

To tackle Covid-induced shocks, the government allocated a stimulus package worth Tk 20,000 crore for cottage, micro, small and medium enterprises. A minimum of five percent of the allocation, or Tk 1,000 crore, is reserved for women.

Another stimulus package involving Tk 1,500 crore was announced this January for such enterprises. Under these stimulus packages, female entrepreneurs could avail loans at a subsidised interest rate of four percent.

Dipali, however, did not know how to avail a small loan from banks like many other female micro entrepreneurs, raising the question as to how effective the stimulus schemes have been.

A recent Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) study found nearly 59 percent of female entrepreneurs surveyed were unaware of the stimulus packages for cottage, micro, small and medium enterprises.

Titled "How useful the stimulus packages have been for women in tackling the impact of Covid-19", the telephonic survey of 70 female entrepreneurs in 34 districts was conducted in October 2020.

These female entrepreneurs worked in 32 types of businesses -- including beauty parlours, clothing, import and export trade, manufacturing, handicrafts, cosmetics, agriculture, dairy, livestock, jewellery, food services, and footwear.

"Women who were aware of the packages were still reluctant to apply for loans," CPD Executive Director Dr Fahmida Khatun, who led the study, told this newspaper. Only seven percent of those surveyed said they had applied for loans under the stimulus package.

The study found a wide range of reasons including lack of information regarding where to go, who to ask, what to do, and how to apply for these much-needed loans. The lengthy process and worries about repayment were also reasons for not applying for loans.

Female entrepreneurs also mentioned that they were discouraged by bank officials who said there was no such loan for women SMEs yet or no order from the authorities to give loans to women, or the extra hassle created by bank officials discouraged them from applying for a loan.

Leaders in the sector said the government's stimulus packages were not designed with women in mind, and hence, these have not been completely successful in addressing female entrepreneurs' needs during the pandemic.

Kaniz Almas Khan, chief executive officer and managing director of Persona, said those who run micro and small businesses are currently having a tough time.

"They are reluctant to apply for a formal loan because they lack the confidence and documents required to avail loans," she said.

"Medium enterprises who applied for the loans did not get it due to the

complex terms and conditions."

Kaniz added cash incentives should be given rather than loans because this would be more effective in easing the entrepreneurs' burden.

If medium enterprises were exempted from value-added tax (VAT) for at least three years, they will be able to sustain in the industry for the next few years, she also said.

Dr Lila Rashid, former executive director of Bangladesh Bank, however said many female entrepreneurs were able to access loans.

Dr Lila, who was directly involved with the stimulus package for cottage, micro, small and medium enterprises, said as per the bank's data, female entrepreneurs received 5.10 percent of the total amount of the stimulus package allocated for these enterprises, until March 31 this year.

However, the breakdown of the BB data showed state-owned banks disbursed only 14 percent of the total amount allocated for women to more than 65 percent of the female entrepreneurs who received loans under this scheme. The average loan size was Tk 3 lakh, she said.

On the other hand, private commercial banks disbursed 73 percent of the amount to only 28 percent of female entrepreneurs -- but the size of each loan was an average amount of around Tk 79 lakh in Islamic banks and Tk 29 lakh in non-Islamic banks.

This means that a few women benefited comparatively larger enterprises benefited the most from the stimulus package.

"We have to pay more attention to our micro entrepreneurs because their problems are not similar to that of medium enterprises," Dr Lila said at a webinar in mid-April.

"They are mostly from the informal sector and we must keep in mind that they cannot be served through formal banks.

"They have been taking loans from NGOs and microfinance institutions at interest rates of almost 24 percent, but are not applying to banks to have loans against seven to nine percent interest rates.

"We need to look into the problems regarding the supply and demand sides of the banks."

Dr Fahmida recommended that there be nationwide campaigns to create public awareness on the stimulus packages so that the general people can clearly understand what kinds of support the government is providing, who is eligible for such support, and how to obtain the support.

"The quota for women in the existing liquidity support package for cottage, micro small and medium enterprises should be increased," she said.

The status of the disbursement and the lists of beneficiaries should be made available for the public, to ensure transparency and accountability, she added.

In the new budget, announced on June 3, no new measures for cottage, micro, small and medium enterprises were announced, except that existing packages be disbursed and banks meet their targets.

The finance minister also announced that up to Tk 70 lakh of business turnover of female SME entrepreneurs will be exempt from taxation.

The robot nurse

College student gives demo to doctors, officials

SUSHANTA GHOSH, Barishal

Robots have been seen assisting medical staff at Covid-19 hospitals across the world but it has never been seen here.

And when a robot, made by an 11th grader, gave a demonstration at Barishal's Agailjhara Upazila Health Complex on Monday, everyone inside the hospital was thrilled.

The machine, named Sebak (nurse) by the maker Shuvo Karmaker, successfully delivered a sanitiser and medicines to a patient. It also recorded the doctor's advice and showed it to the patient on its monitor.

"The way Sebak functions, it is clear that it can help doctors and nurses in treating Covid-19 patients," Bakhtiyar Al Mamun, upazila health and family planning officer, told The Daily Star after the demonstration.

He, however, said the robot was not like the high-tech robots with artificial intelligence being used at some healthcare facilities abroad to treat coronavirus patients. "We can work on this to make it better," he said.

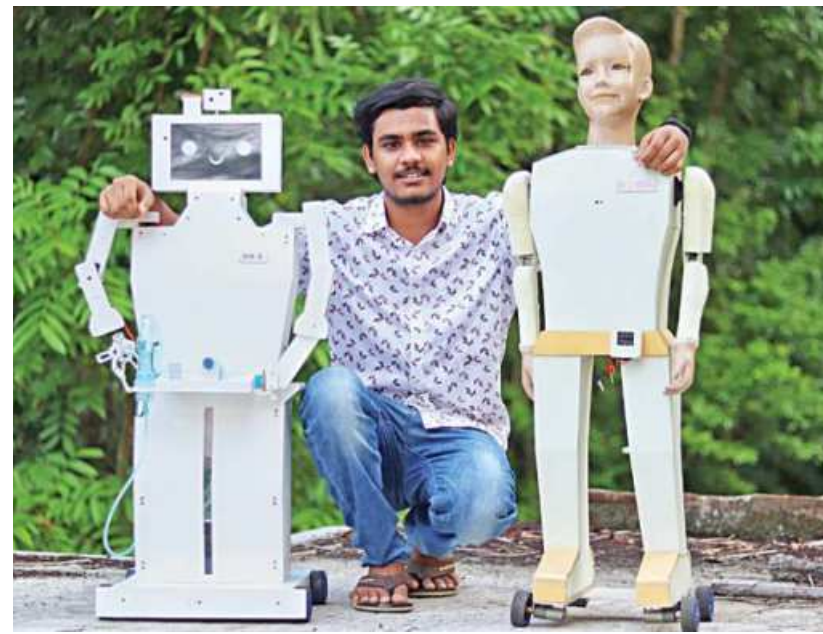
Shuvo is optimistic about his latest project. "I built Sebak to serve patients," he said.

The student of Amrita Lal Dey College in Barishal said that he designed the robot in such a way that it can feed patients and can also be used for disinfecting people.

He also claimed that the robot can also be used for providing oxygen support to patients, who gasp for air.

He said he built another robot "Robin" in 2019, which is capable of answering different questions in Bangla and English. Besides, it can ask for help if there is a fire or a gas leak.

"I love working with robots. I dream that I will do more research and will make more, better robots in



Eleventh grader Shuvo Karmaker poses for a photo with the robots that he had made. During a demonstration at Agailjhara Upazila Health Complex in Barishal on Monday, the robots surprised everyone with their ability to assist healthcare personnel.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

future," he said.

There are around two dozen ways robots have been used during the Covid-19 pandemic, from healthcare in and out of hospitals, automation of testing, supporting public safety and public work, to continuing daily work and life, according to tech journals.

For instance, a cylindrical robot rolls into a treatment room to allow healthcare workers to remotely take temperatures and measure blood pressure and oxygen saturation of patients hooked up to a ventilator. Another robot that looks like a pair of large fluorescent lights rotated vertically travels throughout a hospital disinfecting with ultraviolet light. A

cart-like robot brings food to people quarantined in a 16-story hotel. Outside, quadcopter drones ferry test samples to laboratories and watch for violations of stay-at-home restrictions.

Barishal Civil Surgeon Monwar Hossain welcomed Shuvo's initiative of Shuvo.

Agailjhara Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) Abul Hashem, who attended the demonstration on Monday, said robots can play an effective role in serving Covid patients in various ways and reduce the possibilities of doctors and nurses being infected.

"We are proud of Shuvo's efforts and ready to provide him with necessary support," said Hashem.

Two rail projects face uncertainty

FROM PAGE 1

north-east and north-west regions, officials told this newspaper.

In this situation, the railways ministry yesterday held a meeting to discuss the developments and find out solutions regarding the two projects and another one that also involves China.

It was presided over by Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan.

The meeting decided to send a letter to the Chinese authorities through the Economic Relations Division (ERD) for reviewing their decision regarding the Joydebpur-Ishwardi project, meeting sources told The Daily Star.

Besides, the BR will apprise the PMO of all issues relating to the Akhaura-Sylhet project in writing and seek its directive for implementing the project, they said.

CHINA'S REFUSAL TO FUND PROJECT

The Chinese Embassy in Dhaka recently informed the ERD that it evaluated the Joydebpur-Ishwardi double-line project through an independent agency and found some faults. And the Chinese government is now unwilling to fund the project.

The detailed investment estimation of the project is "missing and the unit cost is too high". Besides, the basis for prediction of the freight volume is not sufficient and the financial calculation does not reflect the actual situation, it said.

It also said revenue from the project will be low and there is uncertainty over debt repayment, sources said referring to the embassy's letter to the ERD.

China was supposed to provide Tk 8,756.75 crore for the Tk 14,250.61-crore project.

Talking to this newspaper, several BR officials said China's refusal to give the loan might have something to do with geo-politics.

Bangladesh's rail communication, especially the operation of freight trains with India, will get a boost once the double-line project is completed.

Besides, the Bangabandhu railway bridge project, which would link portions of the rail line, is being implemented with Japanese funds, and this project is being highlighted

more than the rail line project.

"In this situation, China may lose interest in financing the project," a top BR official said seeking anonymity.

The Daily Star yesterday tried to contact the railways minister, Railways Secretary Salim Reza and BR Director General Dharendra Nath Mazumder over phone, but none of them responded. They also didn't reply to messages sent by this correspondent to their mobile phones.

JOYDEBPUR-ISHWARDI DOUBLE LINE

Delay in schedules of trains connecting the capital with the north-western and southern regions have been all too common over the last few years.

The capital is linked to these regions by the single-line Joydebpur-Ishwardi section and the Bangabandhu Bridge.

On many occasions, the railways minister and BR officials said the problems regarding the delay in train schedules on this route cannot be resolved until the construction of a rail bridge and installation of the dual-gauge double line from Joydebpur to Ishwardi.

The government took up a project in January 2016 to construct a dedicated double-line rail bridge over the Jamuna river.

It then undertook the Tk 14,250.61-crore project in November 2018 to turn the 174-km Joydebpur-Ishwardi section into a dual-gauge double line. The deadline for completing the project is December 2024.

The BR completed negotiations with China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation for implementing the project and the Cabinet Committee on Government Purchase in December 2018 approved a Tk 11,586.68-crore proposal for the work.

The BR in March 2019 sent a loan application for the project to the Chinese Embassy in Dhaka through the ERD and gave reminders for the loan seven times in the last two years.

In its last letter in January this year, the BR asked the Chinese government to expedite the process of signing the loan deal, stressing the importance of synchronisation of the two projects --

the bridge and the rail line -- to get the desired benefits.

AKHAURA-SYLHET DUAL GAUGE
The Ecneec in April 2019 approved the Tk 16,104.45-crore project to convert the metre-gauge railway line into dual gauge from Akhaura to the Sylhet section linking the capital to the Sylhet divisional headquarters.

The project titled "Conversion of Metre Gauge Rail into Dual Gauge in Akhaura-Sylhet Section of Bangladesh Railway" aims to convert 225km metre-gauge line into 239km dual gauge line by June 2025.

China is supposed to finance 66.16 percent of the total project cost.

Officials said all the procedures -- managing Chinese concurrence for funding, selection of contractor and approval of the negotiated price -- have already been completed but the project's huge cost appears to be an obstacle to its implementation as it's much higher than that of similar rail projects.

PMO FOR SLASHING PROJECT COST

In October last year, the PMO formed a committee to review the negotiated contract prices of the two projects along with another involving China.

The other project -- Joydebpur-Mymensingh-Jamalpur dual gauge conversion project -- has not been approved by the Ecneec, and negotiation with China Railway International Group has not been completed yet.

As part of measures to bring down the cost of the Joydebpur-Ishwardi double-line project, the PMO in November last year directed the BR to slash Tk 1,495.52 crore (12.91 percent) from the project's contract price of Tk 11,586.68 crore approved by the Cabinet Committee on Government Purchase.

It also asked the BR to reduce the cost of Akhaura-Sylhet project by Tk 3,354.31 crore which is 20.8 percent of the total outlay.

The BR at a meeting on December 9 last year decided to discuss the PMO's decision with the Chinese contractors for the two projects.

Both the Chinese contractors disagreed over the revised costs and conveyed it to the BR, according to railway officials.

Tortured abroad

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With nowhere to go after landing at the Dhaka airport, the woman informed the Airport Armed Police Battalion about her helpless state.

She was later handed over to the BRAC Migration Program.

"Such incidents are very unfortunate. This is another example of the extreme persecution of our expatriate women workers in Saudi Arabia," Shariful Hassan told The Daily Star.

He said there should be a proper investigation into these incidents and that the household which employed her in Saudi Arabia should be investigated. If necessary, DNA tests should be done to find out the paternity of the child.

Shariful said their primary challenge now is to keep the baby healthy and support the woman mentally. "We will then try to get her to her village home."

Shariful said they have seen 12 such incidents before. "We tried to stand by their side, but we need to raise our voices and policymakers should play a responsible role to prevent such incidents in future."

According to BRAC's migration programme, another female expatriate worker returned to Dhaka from Saudi Arabia on April 2 and left her eight-month-old baby at the Dhaka airport.

On March 26, a woman from Narsingdi's Belabo upazila returned home from Saudi Arabia on March 26 with a son after having lost her psychological balance.

She had given birth in that state in a jail in Makkah, Saudi Arabia.

On February 24, another female domestic worker was forced to return from Oman with a four-month-old daughter.

Upon arrival at the airport, she told the APBn that the father of her child was an Omani citizen. Torturing and abusing her, he handed her over to Oman police after she became pregnant. The mother gave birth while in the Oman deportation camp.

On December 16 last year, another female migrant worker was forced to return home from Oman with her three-month-old child.

From cop to drug

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They had a connection that could help them get the pills.

Atiqul met drug dealer Salahuddin when he was the in-charge of Sonarpara check-post in Cox's Bazar, the investigator said in his probe report. The SI used to buy the pills from Salahuddin for his own consumption then.

When Atiqul approached Salahuddin for getting the pills in bulk at a low price, Salahuddin introduced the SI to Abdul Mazed, a boatman who smuggles the pills into Cox's Bazar from Myanmar, according to the charge sheet.

Salahuddin became the middle man. Salahuddin and Mazed came to Dhaka several times to deliver the drugs to SI Atiqul, the probe report said.

With his supply chain figured out, Atiqul started selling the drug to dealers in the capital. The investigation officer found at least four dealers -- Humayun Ahmed, Hasan, Shakil and Shahidul -- to whom the SI sold yaba pills.

According to Bandarban district police, Atiqul was suspended soon after his arrest.

"On January 1, 2019, Atiqul joined Bandarban court as CSI. But he did not work there after taking leave on March 23 last year," said Md Monirul Islam, court inspector of Bandarban.

"A departmental investigation is underway...," Monirul said.

Dhaka University's criminology department Prof Ziaur Rahman told The Daily Star, "Initially, the dope test system is very effective to prevent the law enforcers from narcotics use, but it should be done regularly."

Severe punishment must be taken against those law enforcers involved in narcotics trade and drug use, Ziaur added.

New cases

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The positivity rates were 14.53 percent in Rajshahi and 36.05 percent in Khulna divisions.

The positivity rate was 59.34 percent in Satkhira, 29.3 percent in Chuadanga, 38.15 percent in Narail, 20.24 percent in Rajshahi, and 20 percent in Joypurhat districts.

In the same 24 hours, the overall positivity rate has also increased to 12.33 percent from 12.12pc the previous day.

A total of 2,537 people tested positive for coronavirus across the country in the same period.

The total number of recorded deaths from Covid-19 was 12,949, as of yesterday.

"There are restrictions in bordering areas because of the high transmission rates. The transmission is stable in those districts currently and we hope it will fall soon," Dr Nazmul Islam, spokesperson of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), told a virtual briefing yesterday.

The overall transmission has been on the rise since June 2, he said.

Of those who were reported dead yesterday, there were 17 men and 19 women.

Six each were from Dhaka and Chattogram divisions. Six died in Rangpur division and one in Sylhet division.

The national positivity rate remained below five percent in January and February. But the numbers began to rise from the second week of March amid slack enforcement of health safety guidelines.

The transmission rate fell in mid-May before beginning to rise two weeks ago.

US Senate confirms first Biden judges to federal bench

AFP, Washington

The US Senate confirmed Joe Biden's first two judicial nominees onto federal benches Tuesday, helping the president fulfill his priority to bring greater diversity to the nation's courts.

Julien Neals, who is African American, was confirmed on a 66-33 vote as the newest judge for the US District of New Jersey.

Hours later a second Biden pick, Regina Rodriguez, was also confirmed on a bipartisan vote, 72-28, to serve on the US District Court in Colorado.

"They are both highly qualified, and they represent the diversity that is one of the ultimate strengths of our

nation," Biden said.

"Other nominees are awaiting confirmation who also have bipartisan support, and I hope they will be rapidly confirmed as well."

Democrats see Biden as seeking to rebalance the judiciary after four years of his predecessor Donald Trump.

The Republican ex-president left a wide footprint on the courts, winning confirmation of more than 230 judges, three-quarters of whom are men and 85 percent of whom are white, according to the American Constitution Society.

Trump openly declared to his voters that he would choose conservative judges who opposed abortion and

defended gun rights.

Determined to dilute Trump's influence, Biden is acting swiftly to fill as many vacancies as possible before next year's midterm elections, when Democrats risk losing control of the Senate.

"We're appointing really excellent judges who are diverse -- not only in race, and gender and LGBTQ and religion, but also in background," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said Tuesday.

They are "much more diverse and I think far more qualified than the narrow, rightwing people who Trump continued