

BANGLADESH UPDATE

2,576
New cases in 24hrs

8,20,395
Total cases

12,989
Deaths

7,59,630
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

3,783,017
Deaths

175,392,122
Total cases

EC postpones polls to 163 UPs due to Covid

By-election to three JS seats deferred

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Election Commission has postponed polls to 163 union parishads in Khulna, Bagerhat, Satkhira, Noakhali, Chattogram and Cox's Bazar districts due to a surge in Covid-19 cases.

The election to the rest of 204 union parishads and by-polls to Laxmipur-2 constituency will be held as per schedule on June 21, EC Secretary Humayun Kabir Khandakar said.

He made the statement after a commission meeting yesterday.

The commission has also decided to withhold elections to nine municipalities, he said.

The by-polls to Dhaka-14, Cumilla-5 and Sylhet-3 constituencies have been rescheduled to July 28 from July 14.

After receiving reports from local administrations, regional election officials and recommendations of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), the EC has decided to postpone the elections, the EC secretary said.

Humayun Kabir Khandakar said they were going to hold the by-polls to parliamentary constituencies due to constitutional obligations.

He also said that they were going to hold elections to rest 204 union parishads as the Covid-19 transmission rate was low at the places.

Asked about how they defined low or high Covid-19 rates, he said they were not going to hold the election in 163 union parishads that were situated in the high transmission rate given by IEDCR.

Humayun, however, did not answer questions regarding who would

take responsibilities if the Covid-19 transmission rate increased in those voting areas.

On June 21, the EC decided to hold all postponed elections, including the by-polls to Laxmipur-2, the first phase of union parishad, and the sixth phase of municipality polls.

The same day the EC also announced the schedule for the by-polls to Sylhet-3, Dhaka-14, and Cumilla-5 constituencies, slating the voting date on July 14.

On March 3, the EC announced the schedule for by-polls to Laxmipur-2 constituency, polls to 371 union parishads and 11 municipalities, slating the election date on April 11.

On April 1, the commission postponed all the elections due to the Covid-19 situation.

According to the constitution, by-elections to fill the vacant seat of a member of parliament should be held within 90 days. Provided that in a case where, in the opinion of the CEC, it is not possible, for reasons of an act of God, to hold such election within 90 days period.

On February 22, the parliament secretariat issued a gazette notification announcing that Laxmipur-2 fell vacant because of Mohammad Shahid Islam, also known as Kazi Papul's mortal turpitude.

The gazette has been in effect since January 28 when Papul was sentenced to four years of rigorous imprisonment by a Kuwait court.

Sylhet-3 seat fell vacant following Awami League MP Mahmud Us Samad Chowdhury's death on March 11, Dhaka-14 following AL MP Aslamul Hoque's death on April 4, and Cumilla-5 fell vacant after AL MP Abdul Matin Khasru's death on April 14.



Police and railway employees remove a tree that fell on the locomotive of Parabat Express in Lawachhara of Moulvibazar around noon yesterday. The accident happened when the train was heading for Sylhet from Dhaka. This disrupted rail communication on the route for about an hour.

PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

Bearing the unbearable

FROM PAGE 1

Asked how local police could submit the charge sheet, he said, "You better ask the local police about it."

"Towhid left the village after the killing and started working in Chattogram," Sub-Inspector Mansur told this newspaper on Wednesday.

Billal also vanished soon after the re-investigation began, he said, adding, "We managed to arrest the duo through digital surveillance."

Towhid, arrested in Chattogram, was produced before the Bogura court on October 24, 2019.

In his statement under Section 164 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, Towhid said he was annoyed with Sohag for ruining his son's education, according to sources.

"I shared this with my cousin Billal. He asked me to bring Sohag to the jute field to give the kid a lesson. In the evening, I told Sohag I need him to pick vegetables and he agreed," Towhid told the court.

"I took the boy to the field and handed him over to Billal and came back. Around 8:30pm, his body was found there."

The PBI team arrested Billal from Gazipur and produced him before the court on January 14 this year.

In his statement, Billal said Sohag's father owned a chili field. One day, Billal's goat ate up the plants there and this made Mohidul very angry.

and his cousin Billal Hossain, 40, were seen near the spot on the day of the incident.

"Mohidul even slapped me," he said. "On the day, learning about Towhid's anger, I asked him to bring Sohag to the field. He accordingly brought the kid. I held his two legs tight while Towhid strangled him and hacked him with a sickle," said Billal.

Akrumul Hossain, police super of PBI Bogura, said, "We did not find any involvement of Sourav in the case. We have almost completed the investigation and will file a fresh charge sheet soon."

ROLE OF LOCAL POLICE

Contacted, Nayan Kumar, former sub-inspector of Sariakandi Police Station, who submitted the first charge sheet, said, "We have a lot of work to do at the police station and PBI investigated it for four to five years. There can be new findings."

Nayan, now working as CID Inspector in Natore, added, "I have submitted the charge sheet based on my findings."

Replying to a query, he said it was the court which recorded Sourav's statement. "I did not take any favour from anyone for this."

Banaj Kumar Majumder, deputy inspector general of police and chief of PBI, said higher officials should be involved in the process before any recording of a child's confessional statement.

Sharpen focus on China

US defense chief tells Pentagon

AFP, Washington

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin directed the Pentagon on Wednesday to sharpen its focus on China, which the United States has tagged as its top strategic rival.

"Now, it is up to the Department to get to work," Austin said after issuing an internal directive to the giant Pentagon bureaucracy.

The directive, details of which are classified, comes after an assessment by a task force established by the new Biden administration in February to study the Defense Department's strategy towards China.

"The initiatives I am putting forward today are nested inside the larger US government approach to China and will help inform the development of the National Defense Strategy we are working on," Austin said.

A senior defense official said the task force had identified a "say-do" gap between the stated prioritization of China and what we saw in a number of areas related to attention and resources and processes.

"The directive today is really about

ensuring that the department lives up to that prioritization," the official said.

Austin said the directive will "improve the Department's ability to revitalize our network of allies and partners, bolster deterrence, and accelerate the development of new operational concepts, emerging capabilities, future force posture, and a modernized civilian and military workforce."

Pentagon operations over the past two decades have been focused largely on dealing with jihadist militants in the Middle East and not a modern army such as that of China.

The Pentagon's 2018 National Defense Strategy identified China as a major strategic competitor but the task force found that not much had been done to meet the challenges posed by Beijing.

The US military is currently seeking to expand its presence in the Pacific at a time when China has been increasingly belligerent towards Taiwan, which it considers part of its territory.

Govt employees

FROM PAGE 1

without the previous sanction of the government, permit any member of his family to engage in any trade in the area over which such government servant has jurisdiction."

The ACC said they discovered the "huge" number of government employees involved in this while enquiring into allegations of people accumulating wealth beyond their known sources of incomes.

Surprisingly, the graft watchdog only asked the cabinet secretary to make all public servants aware of the rules, but did not ask him for further probe or to take punitive actions against the rules violators.

The Cabinet Division, in response to the ACC's letter, on April 8 only asked secretaries to make sure that the public servants under their jurisdiction were aware of the rules.

Different ministries and divisions have issued directives in this regard, sources said.

Road Transport and Highways Division on June 1 asked all its agencies, including Roads and Highways Department and Bangladesh Road Transport Authority, to act according to the Cabinet Division's directives, they said.

Transparency International Bangladesh thinks only creating awareness is not enough. Departmental action should be taken to ensure accountability.

TIB Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman said it was praiseworthy that the ACC raised the issue before the Cabinet Division.

"But just drawing the attention of the government and requesting for creating awareness is not enough. Action must be taken to ensure accountability of those who are violating the rules."

He said this must be done not only through departmental action

but also by the ACC, whose job is to ensure accountability of anyone with unlawful income and wealth.

Former cabinet secretary Ali Imam Majumder echoed Iftekharuzzaman.

He told The Daily Star yesterday that such activities were punishable. An offender could face departmental actions or even lose his or her job. "Such practices create problem for job discipline."

"Just making aware [of the rules] is not enough. Punitive action should be taken."

However, the former top bureaucrat said in some cases, some lower-ranking public servants can be seen engaged in small businesses to support their livelihood. "This is also in violation of rules and can't be supported. But the authorities can consider the ground reality."

"But if government officials run large businesses, actions should be taken...."

Earlier this month, the finance minister in his budget proposed the highest allocation -- 18.7 percent -- for salaries and other benefits of government employees.

Thanks to the restructured pay package in 2015, civil servants are getting regular salaries along with housing and transport facilities and a significant retirement benefit. They also get long-term housing and car loans at a subsidised rate.

The ACC's letter mentioned that the government employees were making a lot of money, but did not mention how much. It also did not mention how many government employees were involved.

This paper tried to contact ACC Secretary Anwar Hossain Howlader, who signed the letter, for comments yesterday evening, but his phone was apparently switched off.

Cabinet Secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam did not pick up phone calls of The Daily Star.

BASIC Bank, BDBL merger on cards

FROM PAGE 1

available data of the central bank, the total defaulted loans in the banking sector stood at Tk 88,734 crore -- and the six state-owned commercial banks accounted for 47.6 percent of the amount.

The BDBL, born out of the merger of Bangladesh Shilpa Rin Sangstha and Bangladesh Shilpa Bank in 2010, is a rare instance of a sound state bank.

The bank has always been in the green, and last year, logged in a profit of Tk 4.5 crore.

At the end of last year, the bank had no provisioning shortfall and a capital surplus of Tk 605 crore. Its defaulted loans stood at Tk 595 crore, which is 34 percent of its total outstanding loans.

The law to allow the merger will be in place over the next six months, according to Kamal.

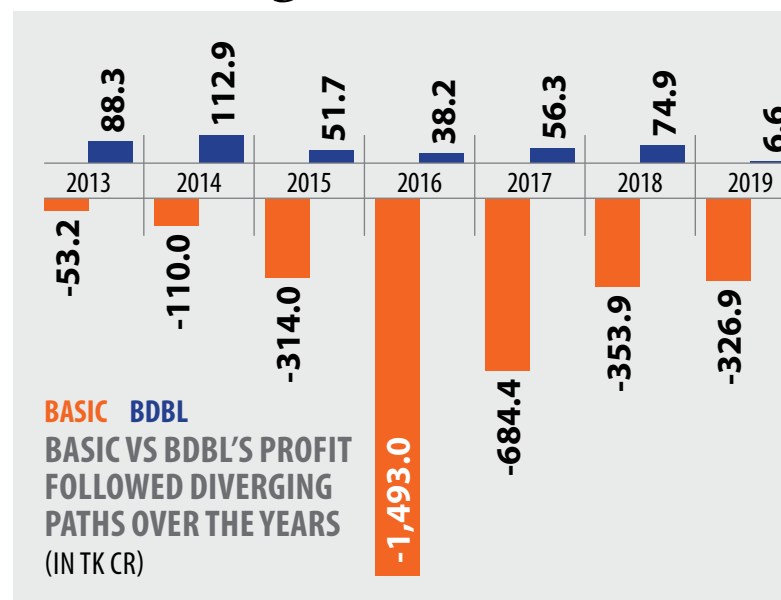
Last month, the cabinet has approved in principle the amendment to the Bank Company Act, which includes the provision to merge weak banks with strong ones as well as a clear outline of habitual defaulters and the actions that can be taken against them.

The draft law has now been sent to the law ministry for vetting, after which it will be returned to the cabinet. The cabinet will further scrutinise it before sending it to the parliament.

Banks that go from bad to worse to worst will be "forcibly merged" with the sounder ones, Kamal said.

The proposed merger of BASIC and BDBL has synergies.

For instance, BASIC Bank has branches and the BDBL does not.



The BDBL has management acumen and their expertise will be put to use to turn around the fortune of BASIC Bank, Kamal said.

The merger though is not final -- yet. "We have not scrutinised their financials and their equity structure yet. We are yet to seek the two banks' managements' opinion on the merger."

Kamal though is sanguine about the future of BASIC Bank.

"They are trying their best to recuperate -- it is a good sign. I think this bank will be able to get back on its feet."

Kamal also touched upon the habitual and wilful defaulters: they

will not be let off scot-free as per the provision of the draft Bank Company Act.

As is practice, once the banks file cases against the defaulters after exhausting all options to recover the funds.

But the defaulters tend to file writ petitions one after another to drag the case for years and to prevent them from being officially classified as defaulters.

Under the new rules Kamal has prepared, defaulters will not be able to file any writs without furnishing 20-25 percent of the amount owed to banks.

"It is not that we are not doing anything," he added.

UP member shot dead in Noakhali

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Noakhali

A Union Parishad member was shot dead by a group of unidentified miscreants in Noakhali's Hatia upazila early yesterday.

The dead is Rabindra Chandra Das, 48, a member of Char Ishwar Ward-3 and the upazila unit Awami League's executive committee. He was also a candidate for UP election to be held on June 21.

Rabindra was attacked around 2:00am yesterday on the main road of Char Ishwar, said Al Amin, president of the upazila unit Sramik League.

Amin and Rabindra were riding a motorcycle when they were attacked there.

According to Amin, the unidentified group attacked both of them with sharp weapons. They then shot Rabindra.

Nazim Uddin, a doctor of Hatia Upazila Health Complex, said Rabindra succumbed after he was brought to the health complex around 3:10am.

Rashed Uddin, UP member of Char Ishwar Ward-6, said Rabindra had a conflict with the newly-elected Upazila Chairman Abdul Halim Azad.

A total of 11 UP members submitted a written complaint against the chairman recently, he added.

Since then, the chairman had been threatening Rabindra. He was murdered over the rivalry, Rashed claimed.

Contacted, Chairman Abdul Halim denied the allegation, saying that he was in Dhaka.

"My family, party and me are not involved in the murder," he said, adding that a vested quarter was trying to frame him in the case.

Abul Khayer, officer-in-charge of Hatia Police Station, confirmed the incident, saying that seven people including Rabindra on three motorcycles were returning from Bangabazar area when the incident occurred.

He, however, claimed that Rabindra's six companions fled the scene soon after the incident.

Police recovered the body and sent it to Noakhali General Hospital for autopsy, the OC said.

Mohammad Golam Faruk, senior assistant superintendent of police (Hatia circle), said they would take legal action after Rabindra's family submits a written complaint.

Meanwhile, Abul Khayer, officer-in-charge of Hatia Police Station, said they detained a person named Azad from Gamchakhali village in this connection.

Police are conducting raids to nab others involved in this incident, he added.

Belgium ready to accept Afghans who worked with troops

AFP, Brussels

Belgium's defence minister said yesterday the country could take in around 30 Afghans who had worked with its military during the Nato mission, as the alliance wraps up a two-decade deployment.

Minister Ludvine Dedonder said decisions would be taken on a "case-by-case" basis and one man considered to be at risk was already being moved to Belgium with his family.

"His arrival will of necessity be rapid since there is a danger to this person. It will happen around the same time as our troops, with his partner and his child," Dedonder told broadcaster RTBF.

Lt General

FROM PAGE 1

quartermaster general, has been appointed the new chief of Bangladesh Army from June 24 afternoon," a defence ministry gazette said.

He will also be promoted to the rank of general that day, said the gazette, signed by a deputy secretary.

Shafuddin was born in Khulna. He was commissioned into the army in the 9th Bangladesh Military Academy Long Course on December 23, 1983 in the infantry corps.

In 2012, he became the general officer commanding of the 19th Infantry Division.

In December last year, Ahmed was appointed as the quartermaster general after he served as the GOC of the Army Training and Doctrine Command.

In his long and illustrious career, Lt Gen Shafuddin has also served as a director general of the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies and a senior directing staff member of the National Defence College. He has also played a key role in UN peacekeeping missions as deputy force commander in the Central African Republic.

He will replace current army chief Gen Aziz Ahmed.

Gen Aziz took over the command of Bangladesh Army as the 16th Chief of Army Staff on June 25, 2018.

Health crisis deepens in border districts

FROM PAGE 1

stopped admitting patients in its 100-bed Covid-19 unit, reported our correspondent in the city.

As of yesterday afternoon, 126 patients were admitted there.

"We're at capacity. There is no empty bed and that's why we stopped taking in new patients," said Resident Medical Officer Suhash Ranjan Halder of the Covid-19 unit at KMCH.

"Doctors and nurses are always struggling to handle the rush of critical patients. If we admit any more patients, we won't be able to properly treat the critical ones," he said.

Our correspondent from Natore reported that the district hospital was in a similar situation.

Besides, the hospital does not have a central oxygen supply system to provide high flow oxygen to patients, who have been gasping for oxygen.

Yesterday afternoon, there were 43 Covid-19 patients against 30 beds in this hospital, which was struggling with an inadequate number of physicians and technicians, said Assistant Director Paritosh Kumar.

Our correspondent from Chapainawabganj reported that the 250-bed district hospital had 55 Covid patients admitted yesterday afternoon against its capacity to treat 50.

As the number of patients was increasing, the hospital authorities were thinking about raising the bed number to 70, said Dr Ahnaf Shahriar,

focal person of the Covid-19 unit of the hospital.

Our Thakurgaon correspondent reported the district hospital, with a 50-bed Covid unit, cannot provide ventilator support to critical patients.

"We have a limited capacity to treat patients. So we are advising patients to follow our treatment protocols at home," Dr Rokibul Alam, resident medical officer at the hospital, told the Daily Star yesterday.

Meanwhile, the administrations of Khulna, Chapainawabganj, Satkhira, Bagerhat and Noakhali districts continued enforcing strict restrictions on movement to curb the virus transmission.