BANGLADESH UPDATE 3,057 New cases in 24hrs | 8,48,027 Total cases | 13,466 Deaths | 7,80,146 Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE 3,869,663 Deaths | 178,736,796 Total cases

TASKFORCE FOR CURBING ROAD CRASHES

Sits today for 3rd meeting in as many years

Most decisions of before not implemented

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

With most of its previous decisions unimplemented, a taskforce, led by Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, is going to sit for its third meeting today.

Formed in October 2019, the taskforce was made to oversee the implementation of 111 recommendations given by a high-powered committee to reduce road accidents and bring discipline in the road transport sector.

In its second meeting on December 23, the taskforce decided that drivers, conductors and helpers of public transports have to be given appointment letters.

Transport association owners and workers were asked to ensure the matter jointly but no such move was taken.

Shajahan Khan, president of Bangladesh Road Transport Workers' Federation, said the Road Transport Act-2018 stipulates the appointment for drivers.

He opined for incorporating provisions in the act for imposing fines in this regard, read the meeting minutes.

Mashiur Rahman Ranga and Khondaker Enayet Ullah, president and secretary general of the Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association, gave contradictory statements over the issue in the meeting.

Ranga said owners and workers outside the capital have decided to give appointment to drivers, but it is confusing as to why this has not been taking place in Dhaka.

On the hand, Enayet Ullah said field-level people are not as active as the people in the capital.

Effective measures have to be taken at division and district levels.

Contacted, Osman Ali, general secretary of the federation, said, "There has been no progress in this regard. We have sent letters to the owners' associations days after the meeting. But they [owners] are not implementing the decision although they said they would. We take many decisions in the meeting but see little progress."

Contacted, Enayet Ullah blamed the Covid-19 pandemic. "We could not make progress in this regard due to the Covid situation."

The taskforce had also decided that footpaths in the city would be freed from illegal occupation and effective measures would be taken to stop battery-run rickshaws in the city.

Both North and South city corporations and the Dhaka Metropolitan Police were given the tasks to ensure these matters.

This correspondent visited different areas of the city, including Farmgate, Panthapath, Paribagh, Agargaon, Dhanmondi, Tejgaon, Bailey Road, and found most of the footpaths occupied illegally.

Battery-run rickshaws were seen operating different parts of the capital including in Nakhalpara, Tejkunipara, Mirpur and Kathalbagan.

The taskforce also directed both city corporations to do road markings and installing necessary lighting facilities on the flyovers.

The decision was taken after DMP Commissioner Shafiqul Islam said at the meeting that each fly over in the city has turned into nightmares due to the lack of necessary lighting.

The taskforce also asked the transport association to introduce bus services for short distances on highways, so that passengers do not suffer after the illegal smaller vehicles like Nasimon, Karimon were driven off of the streets.

The meeting also decided to carry out surveys to determine the capacity of city roads and number of vehicles.

Accident Research Institute (ARI) of Buet and Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) already held meeting in this regard. The ARI is now preparing a technical and financial proposal for the survey.

Yousub Ali Mollah, additional secretary (estate) of the Road Transport and Highway Division, is the member secretary of the taskforce.

Contacted yesterday, he said today's meeting will discuss the overall progress of the implementation of the decisions taken in the last meeting.

This correspondent could not reach the home minister over phone for comments.

In March 2019, a committee, led by transport sector leader Shajahan Khan, made 111 recommendations in order to reduce the number of road accidents and bringing discipline in the sector.

Later, the government formed a taskforce headed by the home minister to implement the recommendations.

A woman breaks down in tears after her son, son's wife and granddaughter were found dead in a flat in the Kadamtali area of the capital yesterday. PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Throttling industry growth for nothing

FROM PAGE 1

long the most common MFS transaction -- and giving wings to the cashless society dream.

Yet, nothing impresses more than the platform's ability to deliver social safety net allowances to the rightful beneficiaries.

To avoid queues at union parishads amid the pandemic, the government last year began social safety net disbursement through the MFS players on a pilot basis to 50 lakh beneficiaries.

A common allegation of social safety net programmes -- which are anchored on cash transfers -- is that the money ends up in the hands of those who do not need it, as many game the system. The rightful beneficiaries get shafted aside by the middlemen, who tend to be local political operatives.

What the MFS did was cut out the middlemen, in one fell swoop.

The MFS players -- bKash, Nagad, Rocket and SureCash -- worked with the list provided by the finance ministry.

They cross-checked the mobile numbers provided with the NID database of the Election Commission to ensure the same person did not get credited more than once -- a phenomenon that allegedly takes place during cash transfers.

The sifted numbers were sent to the Bangladesh Bank to check whether there were any national savings certificates bought with the NIDs. If there were, the numbers were struck off the list.

Thanks to the vetting process, the initial list of 50 lakh was narrowed down to 35 lakh, and the amount for the 15 lakh beneficiaries was sent back to the finance ministry -- something unheard of before this.

In other words, the social safety net transfers became effective with minimal waste.

Given the success of the pilot, the government has ramped up the deployment of MFS for social safety net disbursement. So far, at least 2.30 crore received their allowances through the platform.

The social safety net disbursement can be a well-oiled, efficient machinery if it is done entirely through the MFS players.

But for that to happen, the MFS industry needs to develop much and its technological and logistical infrastructure enhanced manifold. In short, a vast amount of investment is needed in the sector.

As of April, which is the latest available data from the central bank, there are 9.6 crore registered MFS accounts but just 38.5 percent of them had made transactions in the past 90 days. A year earlier, there were 8.5 crore registered accounts and 2.8 crore active accounts.

At present, there are 15 MFS players -- with bKash, Nagad and Rocket ruling the roost.

None of the players is logging in profit, meaning the 32.5 percent corporate tax -- which is a tax on the profits of a corporation -- applicable on MFS players yields nothing for the government exchequer.

Bafflingly, in the proposed budget for fiscal 2020-21, the corporate tax was hiked further. For non-listed MFS players, it would be 40 percent and for listed ones, 37.5 percent.

This begs the question: what was the point of hiking the rate further when the outcome would be the same as before?

The only impact it would have is scare away foreign investors -- at a time when the industry was becoming attractive to them given the robust growth seen in the last few years.

And this is not the first time that the government has arrested the growth of a highly promising industry.

When the mobile industry was revving, the government had encumbered the operators with the highest tax burden in the world -- to the point that it failed to draw in much foreign investment after that, and a few big names made their exit consequently.

Ultimately, the mobile users are the losers as they have to make do with substandard service.

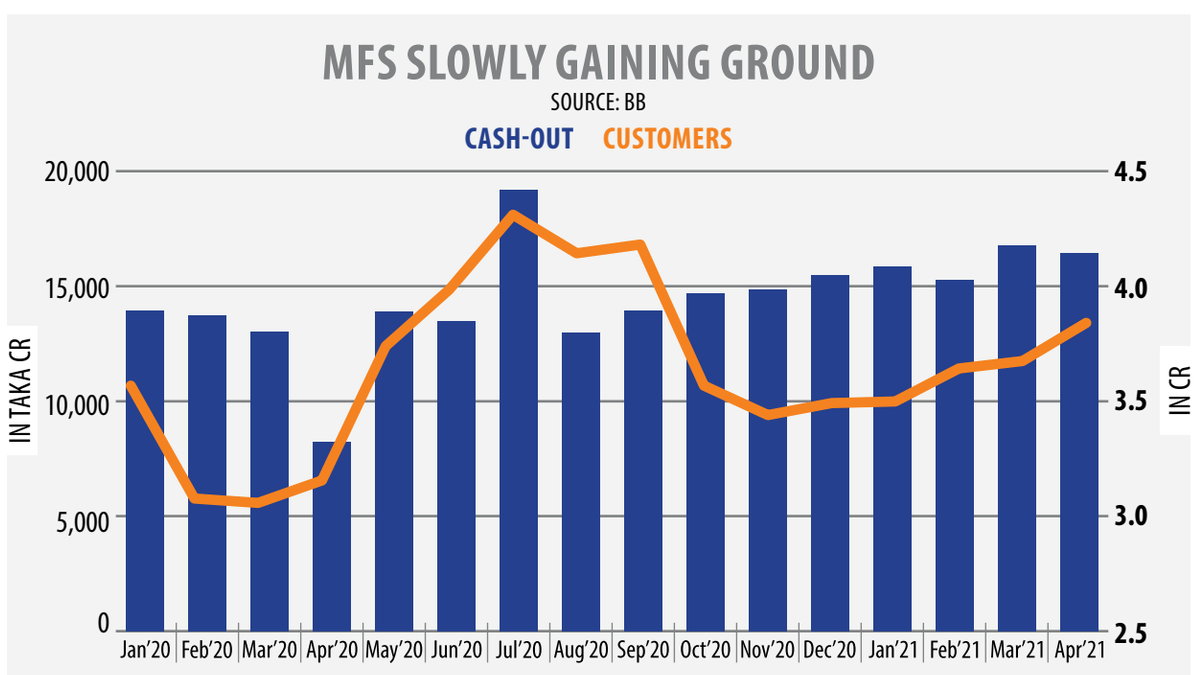
A similar pattern is now being witnessed in the case of the MFS industry, which is still in its fledgling state.

And it is not that that National Board of Revenue is not getting anything out of the MFS industry: it gets value-added tax and advance income tax from the transactions on the platform.

A 40 percent corporate tax is not a small amount and is in the range of banks and non-bank financial institutions, which have plenty of income-generating options.

What's worse is the corporate tax is immaterial -- for the foreseeable future.

Is it not in the best interest of the government that the industry blossoms to its full potential? Why nip it at the bud?



Man called out of home, shot dead in Bandarban

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Bandarban*

A 55-year-old man was shot dead in a remote village in Rowangchhari, Bandarban, on Friday night.

Omar Faruq, 55, was a resident of Tulachhari Aga Tripura Para, said Touhid Kabir, officer-in-charge of Rowangchhari Police Station.

"The assailants surrounded his house around 9:00pm and asked him to come outside and shot him dead on the spot," said the OC.

Faruq, who was a farmer, is survived by three daughters and a son, he added.

Gandi Lal Tanchangya, a ward council member of the area, said people of the neighbourhood have been in fear since the murder.

Khaleda now

FROM PAGE 1

April 27, three days after she tested positive for coronavirus for a second time.

She first tested positive on April 11. She also has arthritis, diabetes and eye problems.

She was taken to the hospital's Coronary Care Unit (CCU) with breathing difficulties. Later, she tested negative and shifted to a cabin from CCU.

The government released Khaleda from jail on March 25 last year, suspending her sentence as per section 401 (1) of the Criminal Code of Procedure. The suspension was later extended twice.

The BNP chairperson landed in jail on February 8, 2018, after a special court sentenced her to five years in prison in the Zia Orphanage Trust corruption case.

On October 30, 2018, the High Court raised her punishment to 10 years.

Vaccination begins

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discipline".

Of the 67 centers, four are in Dhaka city, including at Dhaka Medical College Hospital, Sir Salimullah Medical College Hospital, Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital and Mugda Medical College Hospital.

Visiting the Mugda hospital yesterday, a correspondent of The Daily Star saw many people heading home after failing to get the jab.

Ashim Kumar Nath, director of the hospital, said, "We have received 2,400 doses of Sinopharm vaccine. Currently, we are vaccinating students. Others who registered for the vaccination but have not received the first dose will get it once we overcome the shortage."

He said those people would be notified about their vaccination date via text.

At the DMCH centres, 303 students have been registered for the vaccination today, said sources there.

According to health officials, the inoculation campaign will continue from 8:00am to 3:00pm every day, except on Fridays and public holidays.

They said almost 15 lakh people, who have completed registration, have not yet got their first shot.

For now, only those who registered with the 67 centres but have not received the first shots will get priority in the current campaign, said a notice issued by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

Frontline government health workers, police members, outgoing migrant workers (registered with the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training), cleaners of Dhaka's two city corporations, and ward or municipality workers involved in funerals will also get priority.

Besides, students of all government, private medical, dental, nursing, midwifery MATS and IHT colleges, residential students of all public universities, employees of the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority, and the Chinese nationals in Bangladesh will also be eligible for the vaccination, the notice said.

The first dose of inoculation against Covid-19 resumed with the Sinopharm vaccine at a time when the country is witnessing a rise in coronavirus cases and deaths.

Bangladesh received the Sinopharm doses as a gift from the Chinese government in two installments.

Parents, daughter killed

FROM PAGE 1

found unconscious in the flat. They were undergoing treatment at Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

"The incident may have been the result of a family dispute," the police official said.

The DC said that Kadamtali police recovered the bodies from the first floor of a five-storied building on Rajjab Ali Sarder Road around 11:30am after Mehjabin called 999 and said her family members were sick.

He said that the deceased's hands and legs were tied and police found marks of strangulation.

At the hospital, Shafiqul told reporters that on Friday, they went to his in-laws around 9:00pm from their home in Baganbari area of Kadamtali. There, his wife Mehjabin served noodles and tea to all. He then fell asleep and could not remember anything else.

Shafiqul added that his relationship with his wife has not been going well for the last three months. Mehjabin's relationship with her parents was not good either, he said.

The DC said that Mehjabin's father Masud has been living in Saudi Arabia for nearly 22 years and he also has another wife there. He returned to the country four months ago.

In all these years, their mother raised the two daughters here.

"Mehjabin's husband Shafiqul developed a relationship with her sister Jannatul. Besides, there were disputes between them over money and properties. All these issues might have led to the woman to kill her family members," the police official said.

He said that the detainee was in shock and that they would interrogate her gradually.

Talking to this correspondent, Mehjabin's aunt Sonia Akhter blamed Shafiqul for the murders and the disputes.

She alleged Mehjabin married Shafiqul six years ago but for the last few years, he has been harassing her younger sister Jannatul.

To escape from him, Jannatul was even kept in a "safe home" for five months two years ago, she said.

"He [Shafiqul] wanted to grab all the wealth of Saudi expat Masud Rana by marrying his two daughters," she alleged.

She added that Shafiqul was accused in a murder case in Keraniganj and to fight the case, he took Tk 8.50 lakh from Mehjabin's mother, which she provided by selling off her property. This is also one of the reason's behind the familial disputes, she added.

The OC of Kadamtali police station said Shafiqul, his wife, deceased Mousumi and Mousumi's sister had been accused in the 2016 murder case.

A neighbour told The Daily Star that the family, which has been renting in the building for four years, mostly kept to themselves.

Sources in the DMCH said the autopsies would be carried out today.

Lockdowns come, always too late

FROM PAGE 1

The districts recommended for the "lockdown" were Naogaon, Rajshahi, Natore, Kushtia, Jashore, Khulna and Satkhira, and all of them are now under such restrictions imposed in the past ten days.

In some of those districts, one in every two people tested is Covid-19 positive, resulting in dozens of deaths every day, shows DGHS data.

Many are dying without treatment as hospitals there are no longer capable of receiving new patients.

Besides, the number of high-risk districts rose to 54 yesterday from 36 on June 3, DGHS data shows.

A district is considered a high-risk zone if the infection rate there is 10 percent and above, according to the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research.

With the highest 24 Covid-19 deaths reported in Khulna and the transmission continued turning more ferocious, the district administration of Khulna yesterday decided to enforce movement restriction from Tuesday.

So far, a total of 12 districts slapped restrictions to curb the skyrocketing community transmission of the Delta variant of novel coronavirus, which has thrown the Khulna and Rajshahi division into a grave situation, said experts.

The districts include -- Satkhira, Khulna, Bagerhat, Rajshahi, Chapainawabganj, Bogura, Natore, Kushtia, Chuadanga, Noakhali, Jamalpur and Dinajpur.

Yet, there is no sign that such restrictions are working.

Compared to the previous week, the number of new cases has risen by 55.16 percent and deaths by 46.30 percent in the past week till yesterday, the data shows.

"As the countrywide positivity rate is more than 15 percent, there is no alternative to a countrywide lockdown. And to make the lockdown fruitful, there must be an enormous number of daily tests. But the government never did this," Prof Ridwanur Rahman, an infectious disease specialist, told The Daily Star yesterday.

He said, "What the government said about lockdown, they do not mean it in reality. The government steps are just an eyewash. So the people are too reluctant to adhere to the health safety guidelines."

He said the lack of coordination among different government bodies has been causing loss of lives and livelihood since the beginning of Covid-19 outbreak in the country on March 8 last year.

DGHS Director General Prof ABM Khurshid Alam also agreed that the lockdown in different districts so far has not been a timely response.

"It is proven that the lockdown is an effective measure to curb the spread of the virus. We too had placed that recommendation. However, the health directorate is not the only authority to decide and execute lockdowns," he said.

The DG said a watertight lockdown was missing. "But the lockdown was in effect in some pockets."

He said they will sit to decide the next course of action soon. "When community transmission continues, there is no alternative to enforcing a lockdown countrywide. We will ask for it again. We will sit to discuss the issue soon," Prof Khurshid added.

Earlier, experts blamed the government for failing tackle the Covid transmission immediately after the first cases were detected as it made delay in enforcing several strict measures, including closing of airports and ensuring health rules strictly.

Flower protests in Myanmar for Suu Kyi's 76th birthday

REUTERS

Supporters of Myanmar's detained leader Aung San Suu Kyi wore flowers in their hair and paraded with them at street demonstrations yesterday as she marked her 76th birthday locked up by the generals who overthrew her.

Protests have been held almost daily in Myanmar since Suu Kyi was ousted in a Feb. 1 coup that cut short a decade of democratic reforms and also sparked paralysing strikes and renewed conflict in the Southeast Asian country.

The United Nations General Assembly on Friday called for a stop to the flow of arms to Myanmar and urged the military to respect November election results and release political detainees, including Suu Kyi.

For decades a symbol of the fight for democracy under previous juntas, she often wore flowers in her hair.

Among those wearing flowers on Saturday was activist Thet Swe Win, who had been at odds with Suu Kyi over human rights violations during her own time in office.

"I demand freedom for all the people including Aung San Suu Kyi," he said "Her individual rights and political rights are being violated."

'Apocalyptic' heat wave scorches US Southwest again

REUTERS, *Los Angeles*

An extreme heat wave that has already shattered temperature records across the US Southwest threatened on Friday to push power systems to the brink of failure as residents cranked up air conditioners.

California power grid operators, who have so far been able to keep the lights on, issued their latest "flex alert" for Friday, asking homeowners across the state to conserve energy in the late afternoon and evening when demand surges.