

BANGLADESH
UPDATE3,641
New cases in 24hrs8,51,668
Total cases13,548
Deaths7,82,655
RecoveriesGLOBAL
UPDATE3,879,010
Deaths179,119,250
Total cases

UNGA MOTION ON MYANMAR

Dhaka keeps off vote as it skirts reality

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh has abstained from voting a UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution that failed to adequately reflect on the Rohingya crisis and their repatriation from Bangladesh.

It also expressed deep disappointment at the resolution on the "Situation in Myanmar" that was adopted by the UNGA on Friday with 119 votes in favour, one against and 36 abstentions, said Bangladesh's Permanent Mission to the UN in New York in a statement yesterday.

At the UNGA, Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN Rabab Fatima said, "We share borders with Myanmar; we host over a million of their people. Therefore, stability in Myanmar is critically important for us in finding a durable solution for the million Rohingyas we host, who are victims of atrocity crimes."

The Rohingyas fled the military crackdown in Myanmar's Rakhine State in 2017 to Bangladesh and despite several attempts, they did not volunteer to return saying the situation in Myanmar was not conducive and they had no guarantee of safety and citizenship.

A core group of member states including the US, EU, UK, and Canada initiated the resolution and finalised it in consultation with ASEAN members. It focused on the current democratic

crisis in the country, including the declaration of emergency, and detention of its political leader, calling for a restoration of democracy, and recognising the central role of ASEAN.

Rabab Fatima said as a democratic country, Bangladesh deeply cares about the restoration of constitutional order in Myanmar, but any resolution on Myanmar, whatever may be the context, would remain incomplete if it doesn't recognize the root causes of the Rohingya crisis and make concrete recommendations to address them.

"Failure of the international community to address those root causes, even after the ethnic cleansing in 2017, has led to a culture of impunity in Myanmar, and we can see that playing out now for other minorities as well."

Rabab Fatima said the resolution fails to recognise in its operative part, the urgent need for creating conditions for the safe, voluntary and sustainable return of the displaced minorities of Myanmar, particularly the Rohingyas.

"As such fundamental issues were not included in the resolution; therefore, Bangladesh decided to abstain."

Some key OIC members, including some ASEAN and SAARC members, also abstained. Rabab Fatima, in her explanation of the vote, said the resolution fell short of expectations and would be sending a wrong message.

Another refugee influx

FROM PAGE 1

He said conflicts in Myanmar, security forces in the Ayeyarwady river delta region, after villagers fought back against troops searching for weapons.

"The people of Myanmar have been left with no other choice..." said Dr Sasa, spokesperson for NUG, in a statement, adding that the constant threat of military raids, arrests, torture and killings had pushed communities to take up arms.

"It is just the beginning. The situation will spin out of control. Even if it is one man in a village, they will not just bow in front of these murderers. The whole country is on the road towards a civil war."

Maj Gen ANM Muniruzzaman (Retd), president of Bangladesh Institute of Peace & Security Studies, said Myanmar is drifting towards a civil war.

Its military has the support of big powers like China and Russia, while the western powers have not cut off relations with Myanmar military as they have economic interests, even though they want the restoration of democracy. The ASEAN, Japan, Singapore and India all are still soft on Myanmar military, he said.

On the other hand, it seems the people in Myanmar are quite brave and continuing to resist the military.

Prof Delwar Hossain of International Relations at Dhaka University said the situation in Myanmar may remain unstable for a long time, as the powerful military, which has the history of killing civilians notoriously, will do its best to survive.

Security analyst and former election commissioner Brig Gen (Retd) M Sakhawat Hussain said the NUG has yet to gain any international support, but western powers may eventually support it.

Brig Gen (Retd) Shahedul Anam Khan said the events in Myanmar suggest that ethnic rebel groups will join forces to fight the military. There is no visible solution to the crisis with the international community taking no concrete actions till even yesterday.

Govt to allow antigen test

FROM PAGE 1

Antigen tests are immunoassays that detect the presence of a specific viral antigen, which implies current viral infection. They are relatively inexpensive and can be used at the point-of-care.

According to the DGHS letter, antigen test is being conducted at government hospitals for Tk 100 each and it is now necessary to open the service in the private sector.

The cost of importing the testing kits will be maximum Tk 500 each. Private hospitals and clinics can charge each patient a maximum of Tk 700, including services charges, the letter added.

On September 17 last year, the government permitted antigen-based rapid testing at public healthcare centres to scale up the testing facilities.

In the rapid antigen testing, a suspected patient will get the result within 30 minutes after the collection of samples.

Farid said permission for rapid antigen testing will not be given to all private hospitals and clinics, rather those who have RT-PCR testing facilities and belong to A and B categories will get the permission.

As of yesterday, a total of 334 government healthcare establishments had the rapid antigen testing facility, according to the DGHS.

For the detection of Covid-19, the RT-PCR test is considered the golden standard and it is widely used in Bangladesh. But it takes at least 24 hours to get the results.

If the antigen test results of individuals showing Covid symptoms are negative, their samples will be tested again using RT-PCR machine for confirmation.

Rapid antigen tests are commonly used in the diagnosis of respiratory pathogens, including influenza viruses and respiratory syncytial virus, according to the US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Antigen tests for Sars-CoV-2 are generally less sensitive than viral tests that detect nucleic acid using reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR).

Rapid antigen tests work best when a person is tested in the early stages of infection with Sars-CoV-2, when viral load is generally highest, CDC says.

Contacted, Health Minister Zahid Maleque yesterday said, "We have already permitted government hospitals to carry out antigen-based testing. To expand the facilities, we will give permission to private hospitals and clinics. We are now reviewing the costs and are hopeful of granting the permission soon."



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina attending a virtual programme from the Gono Bhaban to hand over houses to landless, homeless people yesterday. Under the second phase of the Ashrayan-2 project, she handed over 53,340 homes to landless and homeless families.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Distant dream becomes reality

Beneficiaries overjoyed after PM hands over new houses to landless, homeless people under Ashrayan-2 project

ASHUTOSH SARKAR from Chattogram

Having gotten used to a hand-to-mouth existence, and at times even worse, Birangona Shila Guha could never imagine that she would have her own house with running water and electricity.

That farfetched dream became a reality yesterday for Shila and thousands of others like her as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Sheikh Hasina handed over 53,340 semi-pucca homes along with land ownership documents to homeless and landless families across the country under the second phase of the Ashrayan-2 project.

The PM attended the programme virtually from the Gono Bhaban.

"With our limited resources, we're trying to reach people at the grassroots for improving their lives and livelihoods. That's our aim," she said, reports UNB.

The highest 12,436 houses were given in Rangpur division, while 10,547 in Chattogram, 7,630 in Dhaka, 7,172 in Rajshahi, 7,153 in Barisal, 911 in Khulna, 2,512 in Mymensingh and 1,979 in Sylhet divisions.

Hasina said since assuming power, the government has been trying to help the ultra-poor in every way and the result is now visible. "The ultra-poor are gradually learning to stand on their feet."

Speaking at the programme, Shila Guha from Moulvibazar's Srimongol upazila, said, "I was a beggar -- I can now switch the light

on in my house every day. You [prime minister] have given me the house. I am very happy now. I pray for your long life and success from the bottom of my heart."

She requested the prime minister to visit her house and see her present happy state first hand.

"We will cook rice, vegetables and curry if you visit," she told the PM through the video conference.

With a smile, the premier replied, "I will go to see you when I have the opportunity."

Taslima Khatun, a beneficiary of the project at Jhenaihati in Sherpur, said, "I am a divorced woman of 30. I was in a very miserable state with my son and daughter. You [prime minister] have given me a pucca house with water and electricity. I have planted trees in the yard. I send my children to school now."

"It is my humble request -- come to our area and see us all. I never imagined that I will be able to live in such a beautiful house. It is due to your sincere efforts," she said.

In reply, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said, "It is my pleasure and success that all of you are now doing well."

This correspondent visited Boholpur village in Betagi Union under Chattogram's Raujan upazila yesterday. Each of the 30 landless and homeless families were given pucca houses through the project.

The beneficiaries expressed happiness and gratitude to the prime minister.

During the virtual programme, the PM said, "When one gets a home, he or she is thrilled with joy and happiness, and that becomes visible on their smiling faces. I want nothing more than that."

She also said the departed soul of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman will be in peace when every person of the country gets a home.

Hasina said the government has a goal of making Bangladesh free from poverty and it is doing everything to achieve that.

Local public representatives and public servants, on behalf of the prime minister, handed over the joint ownership documents of the two-decimal houses.

On January 23, 70,000 such houses along with documents were given to homeless and landless people in the first phase of the project in line with the prime minister's announcement that there would be no homeless and landless people in Bangladesh.

According to the lists prepared under the Ashrayan project, the number of homeless and landless families (under class-K) is 293,361 in the country, while that of just homeless families (under class-Kha) is 592,261.

Dr Ahmad Kaikus, principal secretary to the prime minister, conducted the programme and made a power-point presentation.

RELATED STORY ON PAGE 5

Teesta likely

FROM PAGE 1

yesterday said there was 114mm of rainfall in Bandarban's Lama upazila in 24 hours till yesterday morning. There was also moderate rainfall recorded in different weather stations in Cox's Bazar.

India's Meteorological Department predicted excessive rainfall in the north-eastern part of Bangladesh and in the bordering areas of India, the bulletin added.

Cherapunji station in Meghalaya recorded 104mm and Gangtok station in Sikkim recorded 85mm of rainfall during this period.

"The water level in the Teesta may cross the danger level at the Dalia point in the next 24 hours," it stated.

The FFWC said the water level of the Ganges river is increasing and it would continue to increase over the next three days.

But it would not cause any floods as the water level of the Ganges is still flowing lower than the danger level.

Pfizer shots in 3

FROM PAGE 1

level, he added.

On May 31, Bangladesh received 106,000 doses of Pfizer vaccine. The jabs will be administered at three vaccination centres in the capital as those need to be kept at a very low temperature in storages that are not available outside the capital.

The Directorate General of Drug Administration approved the emergency use of Pfizer vaccine on May 27.

Meanwhile, the government has started administering Chinese Sinopharm vaccine across the country.

The government had launched the nationwide mass vaccination campaign on February 7 with a target of vaccinating all citizens aged 18 and above in phases.

But the authorities halted administering the first dose of vaccine on April 26 due to a shortage of jabs. More than a week later, the administration of the second dose was also suspended at all centres across the country.

The inoculation campaign stumbled after Serum Institute of India failed to provide Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine amid a surge in virus deaths and cases in that country.

As per an agreement, Bangladesh was supposed to receive three crore shots of the vaccine from Serum in six months.

Serum delivered 50 lakh doses in the first consignment in January, but shipped only 20 lakh shots the following month. The country has not received any shipment from the company since then.

Rights custodian not doing it right

FROM PAGE 1

its own accord.

Similarly, ASK found that in 2019, seven out of eight cases of custodial death remained unresolved. Not one of the eight complaints of custodial torture were disposed of, and only one of the 11 extrajudicial killing complaints was resolved.

None of the seven complaints of death in custody filed in 2018 were disposed of.

"Resolving a case" is also loosely defined by the NHRC, the ASK report found.

"In most cases, the Commission classified a case as resolved when the Government replied that no evidence was found of any involvement of the law enforcement agencies into human rights violations or that the matter is still under investigation. Only in a handful of cases, the authorities state that steps had been taken against those responsible," notes the report.

"In most cases, the Commission only takes nominal measures." NHRC measures can include issuing a public statement, sending notices to a relevant ministry and reminding them to address human rights violations.

"I think they [ASK] brought out the truth. The National Human Rights Commission has an inherent weakness. In its statute, it says that they are not legally mandated to investigate anything related to the disciplined forces," said Prof Dr Mizanur Rahman, who was its chairperson from 2010 to 2016.

"In India, the human rights commission can at least investigate the police forces. But here, other than writing letters to the home ministry, we cannot even do anything about the police, or even investigate."

According to the NHRC's own 2020 annual report, the commission approached the home ministry regarding 401 cases between 2012 and 2020, and received "satisfactory" responses in about of the cases.

They received absolute silence in 32 cases.

Current NHRC Chairperson Nasima Begum, however, said that the government is very responsive to the commission now.

"We have also approached the law minister recommending that the law

be amended to allow us to investigate the disciplined forces," said Nasima Begum.

On May 28, 2018, the NHRC even submitted a demi-official letter to the Home Minister, where it recommended, among other things, "that arrested persons should not be taken along during drug raids, and that if absolutely necessary, then an executive magistrate is also asked to accompany them; that if an unwanted death does take place, an investigation must be ensured through the executive magistrate and responsible persons must be brought to book."

However, it did not follow up on whether their directives are being followed, noted the report.

Former NHRC chairperson Kazi Reazul Hoque, who served from August 2016 to July 2019, was the one who sent that recommendation.

"We used to send 30 to 40 reminders for a response but to no end. We repeatedly sent letters because that is all we could do legally. We can approach the President regarding any complaint, and twice we took advantage of that."

"Following that, the response rate of the ministries periodically improved," said Reazul.

Dr Mizanur said that sometimes they were even able to identify the exact perpetrator but found the ministry unresponsive.

"When we asked the home ministry to clarify how a member of a law enforcement agency is involved in human rights violations, they hardly ever responded. Often they were just sent back to their mother forces, the disciplined unit they came from," he said.

The death of the visually impaired general secretary of the Rangamati Naniyarchar branch of the Pahari Chhatra Parishad Rumel Chakma is an exemplary case where the NHRC's involvement was absolutely nominal, the report claimed.

According to a complaint submitted to the NHRC by Rumel Chakma's father, Rumel was allegedly tortured to death by security forces in Rangamati.

The family claimed that Rumel was picked up on April 5, 2017, and handed over to the police in the evening. He was later admitted to

the hospital the next day with serious injuries and died on April 19, 2017 while undergoing treatment.

"The Commission did not take any immediate action on the matter. After Rumel's death on April 24, the Commission issued a statement expressing that the death of an innocent person through inhumane torture was the ultimate violation of human rights.

"The Commission formed an investigation committee. In the investigation committee's report, the Commission concluded: 'If a person dies while under the supervision of the law enforcement agency, then his responsibility cannot be avoided by those involved.'

"On this matter, the Commission did not take any further steps," stated the report.

Dr Mizanur said that during his tenure when he could not legally investigate, he used to send fact-finding missions. "Sometimes we were successful, mostly we were not."

The NHRC, however, is empowered to do more -- it just chose not to.

For example, even though the commission is legally allowed to direct the government to compensate victims, and even sue the government if it does not comply, it did not implement this power until September 14, 2020, and that too for a case that happened long back.

Khadija Akhter, a teenage domestic worker, was brutally tortured by her employers at Mirpur in Dhaka in 2013.

"In March 2019, the High Court Division of the Supreme Court noted that the Commission had failed to exercise its power in the case of the Khadija Akhter," stated the report. The verdict noted that the NHRC did little else except sending letters to the home ministry.

Seven years after the incident, and for the first time in the NHRC's history, it recommended that the government compensate the victim, said the report.

Such initiative was a rare sight, the report observed. "The Commission should have extended a helping hand in recovering the compensation of all such victims."

The ASK report also opined that the NHRC is leaning towards the ruling

party, and as evidence, they pointed out its investigation into the gang rape of a housewife in Noakhali's Subarnachar during the last general elections.

The NHRC said that there was no link between the election and the rape, while human rights bodies and journalists found that the rapist was directly present at a polling centre as an agent.

"The Subarnachar report by NHRC was nonsense. We expect better from the NHRC," said Dr Mizanur.

LACK OF MANPOWER
The report found that the NHRC has historically been woefully understaffed.

Although an organogram of 93 staff was approved during the formation of the commission, the body initially had only 28 staff, out of which 16 were associate staff. Of the remaining 12, four were working on deputation from the government according to the NHRC, Annual Report 2010.

At that point, there were only eight members to conduct the fact-finding of the human rights violations.

It was only in 2018, that the Ministry of Public Administration agreed to appoint 40 people, including 19 officers -- however, employees at the Commission said that the pandemic put that process on hold.

According to its 2020 annual report, the NHRC is staffed by 48 people. "In reality, the Commission cannot accept and resolve all the complaints it gets because of an acute lack of manpower," the annual report stated.

While the Dhaka office tottered under its heavy caseload, district offices are even worse off.

"The existing regional offices have only a staff member or two. The Cox's Bazar office has only one staff member who is the head of both the offices in Cox's Bazar and Rangamati.

"None of the regional offices have their own vehicle, although the office in Cox's Bazar works with the Rohingya community, and it takes about two hours to drive from the city to Cox's Bazar," states the ASK report.

In May 2017, nearly 10 years after the formation of the NHRC, it got its first panel lawyers. Currently, the commission has 153 panel lawyers in 63 districts of the country.