

BANGLADESH UPDATE



8,483
New cases in 24hrs



9,30,042
Total cases



14,778
Deaths



8,25,422
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE



3,974,318
Deaths



183,593,402
Total cases

Bringing smile to two young faces

Two children with special needs awarded Tk 1 lakh each for their paintings used in PM's greeting cards

AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR TOPLI, Pabna

Two students of Supto Sikha Protibondhi Vidhyalaya, a school for children with special needs, have become a source of pride for Bera upazila as well as Pabna because their paintings earned a place in the prime minister's Eid greeting cards.

The two students are going to be awarded Tk 1 lakh each from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) for their work.



Rupa Khatun



Hridoy Miah

Talking to The Daily Star, Bera Upazila Nirbahi Officer Md Sobur Ali said according to a circular from the PMO, four children of the school had submitted their paintings to the PMO before Eid-ul-Fitr.

Among the huge number of paintings coming from across the country, the PMO selected the paintings of Hridoy and Rupa for using those in the prime minister's Eid greeting cards, the UNO

said. "According to a letter from the Prime Minister's Office issued by the prime minister's assignment officer Afroza Binte Mansur (Gazi Lipi), it is confirmed that the two students will get Tk 2 lakh. Each of them will get Tk 1 lakh as the honorarium of their brilliant work," Bera UNO said.

Speaking to journalists, Miroz Hossain, Mashumdia union parishad chairman and also the founder of Supto Sikha Protibondhi Vidhyalaya, "It is a great opportunity that the paintings of the two students of the school have been used in the prime minister's Eid greeting cards. We will go to the prime minister's office along with the students and their parents for receiving the money."

The school, which was founded in 2007, now has 280 students.

Fathers of the two students have thanked the prime minister for awarding their children.

"When my son grew as a mentally challenged boy, as a father I was frustrated. But my mentally challenged boy now brings pride for us and the people of Pabna," said Hridoy's father Sayeed Miah.

In dire need of oxygen

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Bogura correspondent.

Besides, at least 10 patients have been battling for their lives at Mohammad Ali Hospital where around 223 Covid patients were under treatment against its capacity of 250 beds.

The hospital has only two high-flow nasal cannula devices, according to Dr ATM Nuruzzaman Sonchoy, superintendent of the hospital.

"There are many patients requiring high-flow oxygen support. We are using over a hundred non-rebreather masks. But the elderly patients are suffering due to the shortage of high flow oxygen support," Nuruzzaman told The Daily Star yesterday.

A non-rebreather mask is a medical device that helps provide a patient with oxygen in emergencies.

Abdul Wadud, deputy director at the SZMCH, said there were only 12 high-flow nasal cannulas at the hospital where 102 Covid patients were receiving treatment as of yesterday.

A day before, five Covid patients lost their lives at Sathkira Medical College Hospital following a disruption in oxygen supply. The supplier failed to refill the oxygen tank on time, causing a dip in gas pressure.

The surge in Covid infections and deaths over the past few weeks has overwhelmed the healthcare system in several divisions, draining supplies of medical oxygen, vital for critically ill patients.

Health officials said they do not have the capacity to treat every patient in dire need of high-flow oxygen support even if the number of nasal cannulas is increased, as the country is now facing a shortage of medical oxygen.

Officials at the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) said the oxygen supply at government hospitals rose to around 200 tonnes a day amid the rise in patients.

Around 100 tonnes of oxygen are required every day to ensure uninterrupted supply at all the government hospitals during normal time, but it shot up to 210 tonnes on Thursday, they said.

Ninety percent of the supply comes from Linde Bangladesh Ltd, a multinational company, while the rest is supplied by Islam Oxygen Ltd and Spectra Oxygen Ltd, they added.

"Till now, we have been able to meet the demand for oxygen. But the way the number of patients requiring oxygen is increasing every day, we will not be able to meet the demand," Dr Farid Hossain Miah, director of hospitals and clinics at the DGHS, told The Daily Star yesterday.

"We have already sent six high-flow nasal cannulas to Bogura," he added.

Contacted, Saiqa Mazed, spokesperson for Linde Bangladesh, said, "We are now supplying around 90-100 tonnes of liquid oxygen to the hospitals a day. This is our highest capacity."

Fuelled by the contagious variant of Sars-Cov-2, known as the Delta variant, the Covid-19 crisis started deepening around two weeks ago. The number of infections and deaths kept rising.

According to a DGHS press release, 132 people died from Covid in 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday, taking the death toll to 14,778.

At least 8,483 new infections were recorded during the period.

The total number of infections stood at 930,042, added the release.

The Covid positivity rate was 28.27 percent yesterday while the overall positivity rate stood at 13.94 percent.

OXYGEN SUPPLY SITUATION

The issue of high-flow oxygen supply at

hospitals has been a serious cause for concern since the Covid pandemic hit the country in March last year.

As most of the hospitals across the country had no central oxygen supply system, the government took up multiple projects to set up the system at all district hospitals.

As of yesterday, 56 district hospitals out of 62 had the central oxygen supply system in operation.

However, most of them don't have adequate numbers of high-flow nasal cannulas.

According to the DGHS, 1,670 beds are equipped with these cannulas at public and private Covid-dedicated hospitals or units across the country. Of those, 843 are in the capital and 59 in Chattogram city.

In Rajshahi division, only 104 hospital beds are equipped with these devices while the number is 304 in Khulna, 54 in Rangpur, 36 in Mymensingh, 56 in Barisal, 21 in Sylhet and 152 in Chattogram.

The crisis of oxygen supply at many hospitals in Khulna division, the new Covid hotspot, is a major cause for concern.

In Khulna city, treatment is being provided to Covid patients at three hospitals. But many patients, who are in need of oxygen support, had to return home after being refused admission to these hospitals.

Yesterday, 379 people were admitted against 320 beds at the three hospitals.

Dr Rashida Sultana, director (health) of Khulna division, believes the division's treatment facilities are still sufficient to tackle the increasing number of patients.

The division has a total of 304 high-flow nasal cannulas, she claimed.

Sources, however, said it now has 131 active high-flow nasal cannulas.

About the issue, Prof Ridwanur Rahman, an infectious disease specialist, said despite the prime minister's directives to set up proper oxygen supply system at all district hospitals a year ago, patients are still gasping for oxygen.

"This is gross negligence and a failure on the part of the health ministry," he told this newspaper yesterday.

"Installation of central oxygen supply system requires at best a week under government arrangements. Importing an oxygen generator is not tough either. But the health officials' actions did not reflect the urgency," he noted.

Hospitals started facing a crunch in oxygen supply soon after the second Covid wave hit the country in March this year, pushing up its demand significantly.

The situation turned worse as India imposed a ban on industrial oxygen supply from April 22 to meet its huge demand amid a spike in virus deaths and infections in that country.

Amid heightened demand, the oxygen-producing firms at that time dedicated their production for hospitals treating Covid patients, stopping their supply to industries.

About the shortage of cannulas, DGHS Director Farid said, "The demand for the device was not huge before the pandemic. There was little use of it. Now its demand has risen considerably compared to that a year ago."

"A high-flow nasal cannula requires up to 60 litre oxygen per minute... The problem will not be solved by increasing the number of cannulas unless we enhance our oxygen supply system," he added.

[Our correspondents in Bogura, Sathkira and Khulna contributed to this report.]



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Flouting health safety guidelines, outbound Bangladeshi workers through Probashi Kallyan Bhaban in the capital's Eskaton Garden yesterday to get their names registered through "Surokha" app for Covid-19 vaccination. They went to the District Employment and Manpower Office in the building and filled in forms with necessary information. Officials briefed the workers about the registration and vaccination process.

Pandemic saves Tk 2,500cr

FROM PAGE 1

year's allocation and asking for abandoning of all routine tours.

The money can only be spent for emergency purposes and considering unavoidable circumstances, stated the circular.

In another austerity measure in the aftermath of the pandemic, the finance ministry issued another circular on Thursday, limiting ministries and departments' expenses on purchasing cars by 50 percent of the allocation.

Officials of different ministries and projects make foreign trips every year to take part in trainings, meetings, and seminars on taxpayers' money. Ministers are also keen on making trips abroad.

In some cases, project implementing agencies create provisions for foreign tours and include officials from ministries and departments who have nothing to do with the projects.

There has been criticism over such frequent foreign tours of government officials as many such trips at public expense yield no results. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina also spoke against such frequent trips earlier.

The pandemic was able to rein in expenses for such trips over the last year.

Overseas travels of public servants started declining in January last year and virtually came to a halt in March, when the country reported the first cases of Covid-19. These trips remain suspended till date.

"Excepting one or two ministries, there was virtually no expense this time," said an official of the finance ministry, regarding foreign tours.

The official said the finance minister did not receive files on foreign tours by ministry officials since March last year.

Usually, files on foreign tours by ministry officials up to the level of joint secretary are signed by the minister concerned. Files for anyone above

that rank require the prime minister's signature.

Only a couple of files were sent to the finance minister on visits to India by a few government bank officials for treatment on their own funds, after the neighbouring country resumed medical visa services in October last year, said the official.

Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal said he did not have to sign files on foreign tours, except one made by the chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission.

"I went abroad for treatment three times. But I bore all my expenses," he also said.

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen also travelled abroad one or two times.

A planning ministry official said government officials are now unwilling to embark on foreign tours because of the hassle of doing Covid-19 tests and additional expenses for mandatory quarantine on reaching the destination country.

However, there is a possibility of some foreign tours, especially to the US, by government high-ups this year with regard to Bangladesh's upgradation from LDC (Least Developed Country) status, he said.

The official added that he believes government officials need to attend programmes overseas so that they can acquire knowledge about best practices abroad.

Due to the pandemic, both the annual and spring meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank last year were held virtually. The meetings bring central bankers, finance ministers and others worldwide together twice a year.

Meetings of different ministries in the country itself were also held virtually all year around.

The Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) in a

report on implementation of the 2019-20 budget also highlighted the matter of allocation for foreign tours.

It said several ministries, divisions and departments including the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, Cabinet Division, Planning Division, Bank and Financial Institutions Division, Legislative and Parliamentary Affairs Division, and the Science and Technology Division spent less of its respective allocations for foreign tours.

One of the major reasons was the cancellation of prescheduled trainings, workshops, and seminars abroad, said the report submitted in the National Economic Council meeting last week.

To provide travel expenses, destination countries are divided into three categories and government high-ups and officials get allowances with respect to their designations.

Group one includes countries from North and South America and Europe, group two includes Middle Eastern and African countries, while group three constitutes Asian countries.

According to a finance division circular issued last year, officials with "special status" including speaker of the parliament, ministers, secretaries, lawmakers, and ambassadors in Bangladesh missions are provided daily hotel allowances ranging from \$230 to \$560, as per their designations. They also get an allowance for food, tips, and conveyance between \$87 and \$127 per day.

Officials of general status get daily hotel allowances ranging from \$116 to \$280 and get another allowance between \$64 and \$101.

Cabinet ministers can spend \$700 on entertainment purposes, state and deputy ministers \$600, while the cabinet secretary, chief secretary, senior secretary, secretary, and armed forces' officers with equivalent positions are allowed to spend \$500.

Cash-flush Americans can now invest easily

FROM PAGE 1
for long periods.

Liquid stock markets make investments less risky and more attractive because they allow savers to acquire an asset in the form of stock (equity) and to sell it promptly and reasonably if they need access to their savings or want to alter their portfolios.

At the same time, companies enjoy constant access to capital through equity rights issues.

By facilitating longer-term and more profitable investments, liquid stock markets improve the allocation of scarce resources, that is capital, and the promotion of production of goods and services as well as employment and therefore enhance prospects for long-term economic growth.

Additionally, by lowering enterprise risks and increasing profitability, stock market liquidity can direct more investment and contribute to increased prosperity.

Empirical studies have established that stock market liquidity affects economic growth by and large, and there is a diminishing return to liquidity as a country progresses toward development.

In other words, Bangladesh is in the right stage of development to benefit from a liquid stock market.

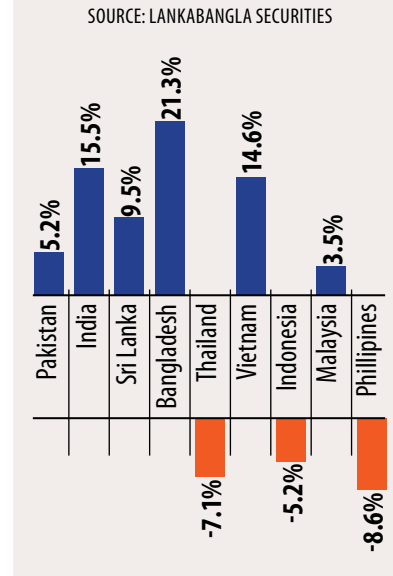
But Bangladesh's capital market is rather illiquid compared with its peers. For instance, the daily trading value, a metric for liquidity, is around \$81 million in contrast to Vietnam's \$714 million.

And solving the problem is Dawn Global, a London-based boutique investment firm.

Last month, it launched an exchange-traded fund (ETF) that provided easy entry to global investors, particularly American ones, to the bourses of Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, Philippines and Vietnam -- five large and fast-growing but historically difficult-to-access markets.

An ETF is a basket of securities that tracks an index, sector, commodity or other assets, but which can be

BANGLADESH'S BOURSE SAW THE HIGHEST RETURNS IN 2020 AMONG PEERS
SOURCE: LANKABANGLA SECURITIES



purchased or sold on a stock exchange the same as a regular stock.

Investors who purchase shares of an ETF can gain exposure to a basket of equities and limit company-specific risk associated with single stocks.

Called the Asian Growth Cubs ETF, Dawn Global's investment vehicle is listed on the New York Stock Exchange.

By way of the Cubs ETF, American investors, for the first time, can get a slice of Bangladesh's stock market -- which yielded the highest return of 21.3 percent amongst its Asian peers in 2020 -- without going through the hassle needed to invest directly.

As much as 17 percent of the Cubs ETF is dedicated to Bangladesh.

At present, the Cubs ETF has positions in eight Bangladesh stocks: Brac Bank, Grameenphone, Square Pharmaceuticals, Renata Pharmaceuticals, Beximco Pharmaceuticals, Summit Power, Marico and Beacon Pharmaceuticals.

COVID VACCINE

Migrants face hassles in registration

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Many migrant workers waiting for Covid-19 vaccine jabs in the capital and elsewhere yesterday could not register their names with the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training allegedly for failing to make their payments online.

The government on Thursday announced that the outbound workers have to register with the BMET first to have access to "Surokha" app for Covid vaccination.

Yesterday, migrant workers went to different district employment and manpower offices (DEMOs) across the country.

In the capital, several hundred workers gathered at the Probashi Kalyan Bhaban where the Dhaka DEMO is located.

Shamim Sheikh, a Dubai-based migrant worker, said he tried to pay Tk 200 as fees for the BMET registration through a mobile financial service (MFS) platform in Munshiganj.

But his payment was not accepted despite several attempts and subsequently he failed to complete the registration, he said.

Many other migrant workers went to the local DEMO office in Munshiganj, but could not register their names due to the similar problem, he told this newspaper over phone.

M Tipu Sultan, president of Recruiting Agency Oikya Parishad, said several migrant workers contacted them and described the difficulties they faced to make payments to BMET through MFS platforms. They alleged that their payments were not accepted, Tipu said.

Besides, many migrant workers, especially those from rural areas, had hassles to travel from one place to another amid the "strict lockdown", he added.

He urged the government to address the migrant workers' problems with sincerity.

Debabrata Ghosh, assistant director at Cumilla DEMO, said about 500 to 600 migrant workers yesterday returned from the local DEMO office without completing their registration.

Zoom meeting

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The leaked video clip allegedly of his recent meeting with Destiny officials and business partners went viral on social media. He joined the meeting from the prison cell at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU).

Rafiqul has been in jail since 2012 when he was arrested in cases filed over embezzling and laundering Tk 4,200 crore.

Meanwhile, four chief prison guards were suspended and departmental cases were filed against 13 others, including seven assistant chief prison guards, yesterday in connection with the incident, said jail sources.

Two prison guards guard Rafiqul's hospital cabin round the clock in shifts.

He is among several high-profile prisoners who had hit the headlines on several occasions for "managing" to go to hospitals from prisons on the excuse of ailments, staying in hospital cabins for long and living a comfortable life.

Once the media reported on Rafiqul's comfortable life, he was taken back to prison. But he again managed to return to a hospital and allegedly started running his business from there.

A couple of years ago, a correspondent of The Daily Star visited the cabin of Rafiqul in BIRDEM General Hospital where he stayed for around a year. The correspondent found that the "patient" moved freely around the cell area, had home-made meals, and met family members and others linked to his business to carry out necessary activities.

The leaked video clip shows Rafiqul discussing the business of another multi-level marketing (MLM) company like the one owned by him -- Destiny 2000. He also discussed appointing 1,300 marketing agents.

Speaking to a private TV channel recently, a number of participants of the meeting admitted joining it.

One of them said the meeting used to start at 1:00am and continue till 3:00am to 3:30am. Rafiqul's profile picture in the Zoom application was named "R".

Jail officials said Rafiqul, as a prisoner, is not supposed to have access to any mobile phone or other devices or internet facilities.

Inspector General of Prisons Brig Gen Md Mominur Rahman Mamun yesterday said a three-member inquiry committee, headed by Deputy Inspector (prisons) Towhidul Islam, was formed on Thursday to investigate the incident.

The committee was asked to submit its report in seven working days, he added.

"After receiving the report, we will take punitive actions against those found involved in the incident," Mominur told The Daily Star.

Asked whether Rafiqul would be taken back to prison, he said it depends on doctors' advice.

Rafiqul was admitted to the BSMMU in April on doctors' advice following complaints of his urology problem and diabetes, the IG (prisons) said.