

BANGLADESH
UPDATE6,214
New cases in 24hrs9,36,256
Total cases14,912
Deaths8,29,199
RecoveriesGLOBAL
UPDATE3,983,564
Deaths184,076,499
Total cases

TORTURE OF INMATE

Five jail guards suspended

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cumilla

Five prison guards of Cumilla Central Jail were suspended over a viral CCTV video footage that showed an inmate tied to a pole being beaten up with sticks by prison guards in presence of higher officials.

The decision was made on June 30 at the direction of deputy inspector general of prisons, said Jailer Asaduzzaman.

Assistant to the chief prison guard Shahnewaz Ahmed and prison guard Didarul Islam were suspended for torturing the inmate while chief prison guard Sharif Ahmed and prison guards Charan Chandra Das and Ananto Chandra Das were suspended for breaching prison confidentiality by leaking the CCTV footage.

The inmate, Shajahan Bilash, fell ill because of the torture and needed medical attention before he was taken to the cell, sources said.

Asked, Jailer Asaduzzaman said, "Prison guards can punish an inmate in three circumstances: if a prisoner tries to create a riot, tries to harm himself, and breaks the rules."

Sources in the prison said inmate Shajahan Bilash, convicted of murder and robbery, is from West Tripura, India.

He is serving sentences of 58 years and has been in jail for 26.

Bilash was recently caught with 12 Yaba pills, marijuana and Tk 600, the sources added. Superintendent of the jail Shajahan then interrogated him.

The home ministry formed a committee with Senior Jail Superintendent of Chattogram Prison Shaiful Islam Khan, Superintendent of Brahmanbaria Prison Ikbâl Hossain, and Jailer of Feni Prison Shahadat Hossain Mithu.

Suspension of the guards was recommended by the committee on June 30.



Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen and Health Minister Zahid Maleque at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka after the arrival of the first shipment of coronavirus vaccine bought from China. Story on page 12.

PHOTO: PID

Hurricane Elsa threatens Caribbean

AFP, Port-au-Prince

Hurricane Elsa churned through the Caribbean early yesterday, bringing powerful winds and threatening to pile further misery on violence-wracked Haiti.

The Category 1 storm weakened slightly overnight and was packing maximum sustained winds of 75 miles (120 kilometers) per hour.

At 5:00am (0900 GMT), it was just south of Hispaniola -- which is made up of Haiti and the Dominican Republic -- and moving northwest at 31 mph, the US National Hurricane Center (NHC) said.

MPs call for

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He said he had written multiple letters to the health ministry asking for medical supplies and equipment for hospitals in his constituency.

He added that he has spoken many times in parliament about what these hospitals are in need of.

Quader also said he called the health minister six to seven times, but the calls were not received. "I called the minister's aide and told him to inform the minister. But the minister did not respond."

He added that none of his effort bore any fruit.

BNP MP Harunur Rashid from Chapainawabganj-3 said, "The [health] minister said that the MPs are the chairmen of district hospitals and they do not carry out their responsibilities. The minister's statement is not correct. This statement needs to be expunged from the parliament procedure."

Ninety percent of the MPs in parliament are from the ruling party. "Are the ruling party MPs not performing their duties?" he asked.

The pandemic might take a turn for the worse over the next 10-15 days, he said, the government should address the oxygen supply shortage and provide the poor people with food assistance.

Jatiya Party's Mujiburul Haque Chunnua said the health minister has in the past compared the situation in Bangladesh to that in the USA. "Fewer people die in our country than in America. Is that his achievement? What has he done in the last one year? Hospitals in 36 districts do not have adequate oxygen supply. People are dying."

JP MP Kazi Firoz Rashid from Dhaka-6 said, "Seven people died in one hour due to lack of oxygen in Satkhira. What have the nurses, ward boys and doctors done?... Does the death of people mean anything?"

He demanded forming an enquiry committee to look into the matter and publishing the findings of the committee.

He then alleged that patients often do not get any treatment after they are taken inside the ICUs. "No one knows what actually happens there."

JP MP Rustom Ali Faraji from Pirojpur-3 said several lawmakers earlier alleged corruption in mask procurement. The health minister then claimed that no mask had been bought at all.

But a top official of the Directorate General of Health Services recently told the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of Health that each piece of surgical mask was bought for Tk 356.

"Why did the health minister avoid the truth?" he asked.

Murder suspect

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Contacted, SP Mohammad Maruf Hossain said he was yet to get any official order. Necessary legal steps would be taken if the allegations are found to be true.

Meanwhile, following the court's directive, the hospital authorities submitted its report yesterday, said HM Saiful Islam, director of the hospital.

Daily Covid cases

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The total number of confirmed cases rose to 9,36,256, around 14 percent of all tests done so far.

Yesterday's positivity rate was 27.39 percent.

Of the deceased yesterday, 84 were males.

The highest 39 deaths were in Khulna division where the positivity rates has been around 35 percent for a month.

The second highest 38 deaths were reported in Dhaka division followed by 23 in Rajshahi, another hotspot of the Delta variant.

In Rangpur division, 15 Covid-19 patients died in the 24 hours while 11 in Chattogram, four in Mymensingh, three in Barishal, and one in Sylhet division.

Of yesterday's deceased, 127 died in hospitals while seven died in their homes.

The latest surge of Covid-19 infection was due to the spread of Delta variant, which is highly contagious, according to multiple studies.

The hospitals across the country, especially in Khulna, Rajshahi, Rangpur, Dhaka and Chattogram divisions, have been struggling for the last few weeks due to high number of patients.

Disparities wide, worrying

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get tested despite showing up for days on end and the region is failing to identify infections before they spread further.

Take the case of Asma Begum, a resident of Khulna city's Shonadanga. She had to come to the hospital two days in a row last week to get tested but failed to.

She came back on Wednesday at 7 am but there were at least 30 people in the queue in front of her.

Not too far away from her was Nitish Boiragi, who had arrived from Batiaghata upazila's Patharighata, which is an hour away from KMCH, on the dot at 7 am.

However, after standing in line for two hours, at around 9:30 am, the flu corner closed shop for the day as the RT-PCR machine was full.

"There were ten people in front of me when they closed the flu corner. Even though I protested, it was no use. I need to come back again tomorrow," he had said on Wednesday.

He would have most likely failed again as the hospital's RT-PCR machines had to be taken out of commission.

The lab had gotten contaminated with the SARS Cov-2 virus and needed to be shut down for three days to get a thorough cleaning.

About 2,000 samples would be sent to Dhaka from the lab for testing, according to Shahhaj Parveen, head of KMCH's microbiology department.

Outside of Khulna city, only Kushtia, Jashore and Satkhira have a lab each.

This leaves the districts of Chuadanga, Magura, Meherpur, Narail, Bagerhat and Jhenaidah to depend on rapid antigen testing, which has more scope for false negatives even if a person is Covid-19 positive.

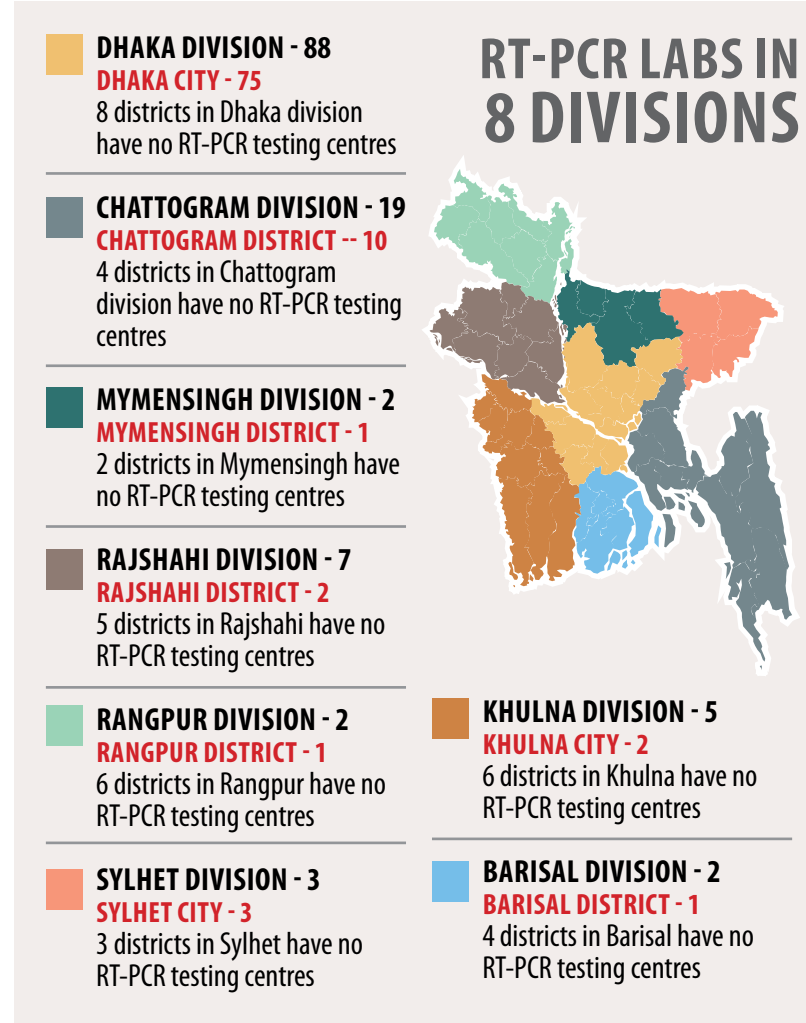
Should patients need an RT-PCR test, the samples are collected and sent to the districts with the testing facility.

Sylhet has three testing centres with RT-PCR facility, Rajshahi has two, while Rangpur, Barishal and Mymensingh have one each.

Many of the districts that do not have RT-PCR testing facilities are also districts with extremely high positivity rates.

For instance, on July 2, 97 samples from Magura were tested and 46 of them came out positive, showing the astronomical positivity rate of the district.

The district sends its samples to Satkhira for testing and it takes more



than a day for the results to come back, according to Shahidullah Dewan, the civil surgeon.

Similarly, on that day, Pirojpur tested 108 samples and 56 of them came out positive, putting the positivity rate of the district at 51 percent.

Thakurgaon tested 276 samples and 125 were positive on July 2, meaning the daily positivity rate of the district was 45 percent.

Rajbari had a positivity rate of 50 percent with 170 people being detected positive.

None of the districts has testing centres and has to send their samples elsewhere.

Even this is a problem as testing in the districts is being restricted to only symptomatic individuals.

A rapid antigen test is carried out first and if the result comes out negative, the sample is sent for RT-PCR to Dhaka, said Nurul Islam, the civil

surgeon of Narsingdi.

And asymptomatic individuals do not come for tests but those who have had symptoms for three to seven days, he said.

Over at Chapainawabganj, only those with symptoms can get an antigen test at the district's 250-bed district hospital, according to Jahid Nazrul Chowdhury, its civil surgeon.

In other words, at a time when testing should be amped up, only a subsection of people are getting tested, making the predictions of future trajectories difficult -- and also massively undercounting infections.

"All districts have to have RT-PCR testing capacity," said Chowdhury, also the vice-chairman of Brac.

Bangladesh has the lowest testing rates in South Asia, but the government is ignoring this, he said, while calling for testing across the country to be ramped up exponentially.

People should have stayed

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spread further."

Hasina said she had called upon people repeatedly before the Eid-ul-Fitr not to move from their respective places.

"But many did not pay heed to that call. They rushed to their village homes. What is the result of that? That's the spread of the virus. If all listened to our call, then this spread might not have occurred."

The premier urged people to obey the ongoing "strict lockdown" rules and health safety guidelines properly to stop further spread of Covid-19. She reassured people of bringing everyone under the coverage of vaccination and other required assistances.

Hasina said the only way to check the spread of the virus is to wear masks, clean hands and maintain social distancing in such a way that none can get Covid afresh.

She reiterated her pledge to bring 80 percent of the country's population under vaccination coverage free of cost as 4.50 million jabs of Moderna and Sinopharm vaccines have already reached Dhaka. Besides, the processes of bringing more vaccines is underway as talks with countries like China, Russia, the USA, and Japan are going on, the PM added.

"We'll bring in more vaccines... we'll purchase whatever quantity is required and for that, we have allocated enough money in the national budget. An amount of Tk 32,236 crore has been allocated in the budget to this end.

Besides, Tk 10,000 crore has been kept aside so that it can be used, if required."

Bangladesh faced some difficulties in collecting vaccines as India stopped export of Covid vaccine jabs after witnessing a massive surge in Covid cases and deaths, the PM said, adding that the problem was over now.

The premier said her government has made Covid testing free across the country as the virus has spreads to districts.

Talking about the ongoing seven-day "strict lockdown", she said the government would look after the food security of the people.

Hasina, also the Awami League president, said her government provided stimulus packages to various sectors and financial assistance to the people (during the first wave of the pandemic) to keep the country's economy moving and protect people's lives and livelihoods.

People of every profession and socio-economic class got support from the government, she said. "We'll again provide assistance to them with our maximum capacity as the coronavirus surfaces again... We'll definitely look into the matter so that no one faces difficulties in getting food."

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS
About reopening of educational institutions, Hasina said the government cannot put the students on the verge of death knowing that they would be infected with Covid.

She, however, acknowledged the students' academic losses due to the

Florida building collapse toll rises to 22

AFP, Surfside

Two more victims were found in the rubble of a partially collapsed apartment building in Florida on Friday, bringing the death toll from last week's tragedy to 22, with 126 people still unaccounted for, officials said.

The rise in number of victims came as Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava said she had signed an order authorizing the demolition of the part of the building that still stands, citing safety issues.

"Our top priority remains search and rescue. I want to be very clear about that," she said.

"We're still evaluating all possible impacts and determining the best timeline to actually begin the demolition."

Emergency personnel had been forced to pause their search and rescue efforts for much of Thursday due to concerns about the safety of the pile of

debris in Surfside near Miami Beach, but were able to resume work late in the day.

On Thursday night, rescuers recovered the bodies of two victims, including the seven-year-old daughter of a Miami firefighter, Levine Cava said.

The mayor said that while each night had been difficult for rescuers since part of the Champlain Towers South complex collapsed in the early hours of June 24, it had been "uniquely different and more difficult" when the young victim was found.

The number of people unaccounted for had dropped to 126, suggesting some people had been located away from the scene. A total of 188 people have now been accounted for.

Also on Friday, a condo building in North Miami Beach, about six miles (10 kilometers) from Surfside, was ordered closed and evacuated after an inspection found unsafe structural and electrical conditions, local media reported.

Oxygen, bed crises severe

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Relatives of patients at KMCH complained that patients were not getting sufficient oxygen flow.

"The oxygen level is low at the hospital and at night it decreases further," complained Sabbir Sheikh, one patient's son.

Sajib Rayhan, Khulna Divisional Store Officer of Spectra, told The Daily Star that the sudden increase in the number of patients has caused abnormal pressure at these hospitals.

He said the demand for oxygen in hospitals has increased three-fold.

"We used to supply on average 50 cylinders daily to KMCH since last year. But demand shot up in the last couple of months. We supplied 301 small and 16 oxygen big cylinders yesterday," said Rayhan.

KMCH's 5 kilolitre (kl) capacity central oxygen system was recently upgraded to 10 kl by Linde Bangladesh.

Dr Subash Ranjan Haldar, RMO and spokesman of KMCH's Covid-19 unit, told The Daily Star that 77 of the 130 beds have central oxygen supply.

He said that they were managing oxygen supply despite the large influx of patients.

"We are expecting another oxygen plant to be operated within a month," he said, adding that it would solve any current oxygen shortages.

Currently, KMCH has a 20-bed ICU unit and 53 high-flow nasal cannulas, said hospital sources.

However, the RT-PCR lab of the hospital has been closed since Wednesday due to "contamination". Authorities said Covid-19 tests would resume yesterday afternoon.

"We are still trying to work with samples on PCR machines. We have tried twice but we were not able to run it at a satisfactory level," said Shahnaz Parveen, head of the microbiology department at KMCH.

"I can't say exactly when it will be okay. Around 800 samples have been collected and 2,000 samples have already been sent to Dhaka," she added.

Kazi Abu Rashed, spokesman of the 70-bed Covid-19 unit at Khulna General Hospital, said that there was no shortage of oxygen.

"A crisis can occur if the tank is empty. But we inform the demand in advance," he said.

Gazi Mizanur Rahman, owner of Gazi Medical College Hospital, told The Daily Star that it has become difficult for them to provide oxygen to admitted patients. The hospital has around 150 cylinders but at times, demand rises sharply, he said.

Khulna Oxygen Bank has been providing free oxygen services to the people of Khulna for the last year. The demand for oxygen has risen sharply

"There was an average daily demand of 40-50 oxygen cylinders when we started operations last year. But we are now supplying 200 cylinders daily and still that is not enough," Asad Sheikh, a member of the organisation, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Contacted, Dr Rashida Sultana, director (health) of Khulna division, said the division's treatment facilities are sufficient to tackle the new Covid-19 surge.

However, according to the respective civil surgeons, only Khulna, Jashore, Bagerhat, Satkhira, Meherpur, Kushtia, Chuadanga, and Narail have central oxygen systems.

The division has a total of 304 high-flow nasal cannulas, said Dr Rashida. She added that 45 dedicated Covid beds along with a 10-bed ICU unit at Shaheed Sheikh Abu Naser Specialised Hospital in Khulna started operation yesterday.

A total of 1,168 people have died of Covid-19 in Khulna division and the total number of cases stands at 59,256.

Probe bodies formed

Two government probe bodies formed to investigate the deaths of five Covid-19 patients at a hospital due to shortage of oxygen have started functioning.

One of the probe bodies was formed by the authorities of Satkhira Medical College Hospital where the patients died and another one was formed by the district administration.

On June 30, five Covid-19 patients died within 25 minutes between 7:30pm to 7:55pm, allegedly due to a shortage of oxygen. The incident triggered outrage among people in the region.

In Bogura, the shortage of high-flow nasal cannulas (HFNC) is likely to be resolved as two government hospitals yesterday received 20 sets of HFNC under a private initiative.

Furthermore, around 10 to 15 more HFNC sets will be provided by the government tomorrow, said officials concerned.

The hospitals are Bogura's Mohammad Ali Hospital and Shaheed Ziaur Rahman Medical College Hospital (SZMCH).

Such quick initiatives to provide the HFNCs were triggered by recent media reports that said some seven Covid-19 patients died on Thursday and Friday at Mohammad Ali Hospital due to a shortage of HFNC.

Yesterday, a total of 226 Covid-19 patients were admitted at Mohammad Ali Hospital, while 102 were admitted to SZMCH.

The district is considered a Covid-19 hotspot. A total of 414 have died of Covid-19, of whom 45 died in the last week.