

BANGLADESH UPDATE

9,964
New cases in 24hrs

9,54,881
Total cases

15,229
Deaths

8,39,082
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

3,996,859
Deaths

184,779,540
Total cases

MOGHBAZAR BLAST

Building had no gas connection

Titas claims after fire service, bomb disposal unit say gas accumulated in building

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN and SHAHEEN MOLLAH

Titas Gas yesterday refuted the inference by Fire Service and Civil Defence and the Bomb Disposal Unit officials that the explosion at the three-storey building in capital's Moghbazar may have been due to the accumulation of gas in the pipeline.

"There was no connection to the gas line in the building," Ali Iqbal Md Nurullah, managing director of Titas Gas, told The Daily Star.

The gas pipeline found in the building was disconnected a couple of years back, he added.

The Fire Service and Civil Defence (FSCD) and Bomb Disposal Unit (BDU) officials found a gas pipeline that was emanating gas while moving the debris from the explosion on June 27 that injured about 50 and claimed 11 lives.

On Sunday evening, Titas Gas officials were called into the site and the gas connection to the building was stopped.

"We are suspecting there was definitely an illegal gas line connection in the building. We are suspecting the explosion took place after gas accumulated from the Titas Gas line," said Dinomoni Sharma, deputy director of FSCD.

FSCD has sent a letter to Titas Gas seeking documents of the connection, said Sharma, also a member of the five-member probe body formed to investigate the explosion.

A letter also sent to Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha to enquire how a residential building was turned into a commercial space, he added.

Rahmatullah Chowdhury, the chief of BDU and the member secretary of the police-formed seven-member probe body, echoed Sharma's account on the gas line.

"There were several gas pipelines points around the building and gas leakage found. The explosion took place after gas accumulated from the line," he told The Daily Star.

There was a sewerage line in the building but no source of gas was found in it, said another high official of the BDU involved in the investigation.

While visiting the spot yesterday,

the correspondent found a rotten meat stench coming out from the building.

The building housed a restaurant and meat shop.

No one touched anything or removed any product as court permission is needed for it, the tenants said.

THE INVESTIGATION

Following the explosion, police have filed a case against unidentified persons but as of yesterday, no arrests were made.

The Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit is now investigating the case.

A letter will be sent to Titas Gas authority, said CTTC officials requesting anonymity as they are not authorised to speak with media.

CTTC would interrogate the officials of Titas Gas, they said.

Police would also interrogate the building owner, Mashiur Rahman, once he recovers from his illness, they added.

Asked about the progress, Chowdhury said they are trying to ensure a scientific investigation and point every single reason behind the explosion.

"The investigation is taking time because of this," he said, adding that so far statements were taken of about 50 people, including eyewitnesses.

PROBE BODY

A five-member probe body was formed by the Petrobangla helmed by its general manager Shahnewaz Parvez last Wednesday. The committee has been asked to submit a report within 10 working days.

The committee members have visited the spot yesterday.

"We are checking the gas line connection and riser in the building. We are also trying to know whether the line was disconnected properly or not," Parvez told The Daily Star.

Meanwhile, the police formed a seven-member probe body yesterday appealed for ten days extra to submit its probe report, say officials.

Regarding the progress of the Fire Service committee, Sharma said they are compiling the findings and hopeful of submitting the report in due time.



A long queue of mostly women waiting behind a mobile shop of Trading Corporation of Bangladesh selling daily essentials in Jatrabari in the capital. The corporation started selling groceries yesterday to help residents amid the lockdown.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Govt bans travellers from 8 countries

India, Nepal among them; domestic flights suspended till June 14

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The civil aviation authority last night imposed a ban on travellers from India, Nepal, South Africa, Botswana, Mongolia, Namibia, Panama and Tunisia.

The Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) also suspended domestic flight operations until June 14.

Bangladeshi citizens who visited the eight countries, categorised as Group-A, in 15 days of their arrival will be allowed to enter the country provided that they have a special approval from the ministry of foreign affairs, said a CAAB circular.

Bangladeshi seafarers who signed-off from the ships of the eight countries in 15 days of their arrival will be allowed to enter the country if they have proper documentary evidence of their profession and sign-off.

In both the cases, those who arrive must be in quarantine for 14 day at a hotel chosen by the government. The travellers will have to pay for their stay at the hotel.

In an earlier circular, the CAAB banned entries from Argentina, Bahrain, Bolivia, Brazil, India, Malaysia, Maldives, Nepal, Paraguay, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uruguay.

As per the circular issued last night, CAAB lifted the ban on arrivals from Argentina, Bahrain, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Georgia, Kuwait, Malaysia, the Maldives, Oman, UAE, the UK and Uruguay.

People will now be allowed to travel to Bangladesh from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Georgia, Kuwait, Malaysia, the Maldives, Oman, UAE, the UK and Uruguay. These countries were listed as Group-B.

Individuals fully inoculated against Covid-19 will have to be in home quarantine for two weeks upon their

arrival. Those who have not been vaccinated will have to be at a hotel chosen by the government for the same period of time.

If the individuals from the Group-B countries have transit in the countries in Group-A, they must not leave the transit airport and be under the close supervision of the airline concerned, added the CAAB circular.

There is no restriction on any other countries, CAAB said.

Individuals found to have Covid-19 symptoms will be sent to government-authorized hospitals for check-ups or to isolation at a government-nominated facility, depending on the intensity of the symptom.

Domestic flight operations will remain suspended from 12:01am on July 8 until July 14, CAAB said.

Medevac, humanitarian, relief, and cargo flights will not be restricted, it added.

Curbs to stay during Eid

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cities for village homes, they mentioned.

Meanwhile, the government extended the lockdown for a week to curb the spread of Covid that has already claimed more than 15,000 lives in the country.

In a gazette notification yesterday, the Cabinet Division said all the ongoing restrictions have been extended, considering the current state of the pandemic.

Contacted, State Minister for Public Administration Farhad Hossain said, "We will do everything to reap the benefits from the ongoing lockdown. The next few weeks will be important for us."

"We have taken lessons from the previous Eid and are proceeding accordingly," he told The Daily Star.

The extension came following advice from the National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) on Covid-19 and the grim records that the country saw in both Covid deaths and new infections.

As many as 164 people died in 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday, by far the highest number of deaths from Covid in a single day since it hit the country last year.

The Covid death toll hit 15,229 and the death rate was 1.59 percent.

At least 9,964 new infections -- the highest in a day -- were reported in the 24 hours, taking the total number to 954,881, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

The daily Covid positivity rate was 29.30 percent, meaning more

than one in every four samples tested positive for the virus.

Last week, the number of deaths rose by 46.6 percent and new cases by 43.6 percent compared to those in the previous week, according to DGHS data.

CATTLE MARKETS

Cattle markets have become a big headache for the government as those in the capital draw huge crowds of buyers and sellers before the Eid-ul-Azha every year.

"We will encourage people to buy cattle online. If the situation improves, we will allow some cattle markets on condition that the health safety guidelines are strictly followed," Farhad said.

Separate websites for buying and selling livestock have been created for each district and campaigns will be run to publicise those, he added.

Expressing similar view, Dr Mohammad Shahidullah, chief of the NTAC, said, "We must encourage online cattle markets."

Even if the government allows cattle markets before the Eid, their number should be very low and the health safety rules must be strictly followed there, he noted.

He further said that ideally, the lockdown should be continued for three weeks at a stretch.

"It is tough ahead of the Eid. What can be done is strict enforcement of the health safety rules in all cases.... violators of the rules have to be penalised."

OTHER MEASURES

Sources said the ongoing restrictions

will be lifted in phases if the spread of Covid slows down.

In the first phase, offices will be allowed to operate before the Eid with limited number of staffers. Private vehicles will also be allowed to run. And there will be no time limit for keeping open stores that sell essentials.

However, public transport and shopping malls will remain closed to prevent people from crowding those to do Eid shopping.

Before all three Eids since the Covid outbreak in the country, there was a huge rush of homegoers making arduous journeys to their village homes without maintaining the health safety guidelines.

During the Eid-ul-Fitr two months ago, the government kept inter-district public transport closed to check public movement, but that could not stop people from going home, using private vehicles.

Shopping malls were allowed to operate under certain conditions, but the health safety protocols were ignored in most of the malls and markets as those failed to control crowd.

On July 3, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed her frustration with the homegoers during the Eid-ul-Fitr.

The PM said she had urged people repeatedly before the Eid not to move from their respective areas, but to no avail.

"If all had listened to our call, this spread [of the virus] might not have occurred," she said in her concluding speech of the budget session.

Malaysia to review recruitment fees, deals

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia will examine recruitment fees charged to workers and review its agreements with the home countries of migrant workers, the Human Resources Ministry said, after the Southeast Asian nation was downgraded in a US human trafficking report.

The US State Department last week ranked Malaysia in 'Tier 3' in this year's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report and said forced labour is the predominant human trafficking crime in the country.

Malaysia's Human Resources Ministry said it viewed the issues raised in the TIP report seriously.

"The government will continue to give attention to challenges in addressing forced labour issues, especially those involving foreign workers, and will continue to implement various improvements to existing initiatives," minister Saravanan Murugan said in a statement yesterday.

The ministry has received 4,636 complaints from workers between May and July 4 via a new mobile app, and had taken action in 3,502 cases,

including investigating allegations of forced labour, he said.

Malaysia depends on about two million documented migrant workers from countries like Bangladesh, Nepal and India to make everything from palm oil to rubber gloves.

Saravanan said the ministry would review the levies imposed by private recruitment agents and check whether there were any hidden charges that might lead to risks of exploitation and debt bondage.

"The Ministry will also review the memorandum of understanding that has been and will be signed with the source countries in particular to strengthen the element of protection of worker's rights and, at the same time, not burden employers," he said.

A national action plan on forced labour and child labour is also expected to be finalised in the fourth quarter, Saravanan added.

Malaysia's state-funded National Human Rights Commission in a statement said the government had taken some initiatives to address human trafficking, but more transparency, law enforcement capacity and stronger labour laws were still needed.

35yrs and above

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inoculation against Covid-19. Of them, 42,89,913 received both shots while 58,20,015 got only the first.

On Friday and Saturday, 25 lakh Moderna vaccine doses from Covax and 20 lakh Sinopharm vaccine doses from China arrived in Dhaka.

On July 1, the government began administering the Sinopharm shots at district-level hospitals and at 40 locations in the capital.

Less than 3 percent of the population have been inoculated against Covid-19.

The mass vaccination campaign, which started on February 7, stumbled after the Serum Institute of India stopped supplying the doses amid a surge in new cases and deaths in its home country.

Amid a fast depleting vaccine stock, Bangladesh suspended administering the first dose of the vaccine on April 26. Registration for vaccination was suspended nine days later.

Bangladesh and Serum signed an agreement that the latter would ship

three crore shots of the vaccine to Bangladesh in phases between January and June.

Serum delivered the first 50 lakh doses in January, but shipped only 20 lakh the following month. No shipment has arrived since. Indian government gave Bangladesh 3.3 million doses of the vaccine as gifts.

Australians trapped in vaccine 'Hunger Games', says top official

AFP, Sydney

Getting vaccinated in Australia is like "The Hunger Games" a top health official admitted yesterday, as the country battles scarce supplies during a growing Covid-19 outbreak.

A vaccine shortage has led to panicked efforts by people looking to get jabbed, said Brad Hazzard, health minister for the country's most populous state New South Wales.

Covid deaths climbing fast

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The number of new cases was 58,111 in the past week while the previous week's total confirmed cases were 40,466 across the country.

Yesterday, the DGHS reported 164 deaths in the 24 hours till 8:00am -- the highest single-day death toll in the country.

A total of 9,964 people tested positive for the virus during that period.

"We are getting very high positivity rates in the samples we test every day. The situation is not good at all. The ongoing lockdown has started only a week ago. So, the number of deaths probably will continue peaking for the next two weeks," said Dr Arifa Akram, assistant professor at the National Institute of Laboratory Medicine and Referral Center (NILMRC).

The RT-PCR lab at the NILMRC tests on an average 3,500 samples daily -- the highest among all the 427 Covid-19 testing labs across the country.

Dr Arifa said, "We have been receiving samples from Khulna, Rajshahi and Rangpur divisions mainly. It seems there are Covid-19 patients in every household in these divisions and it has spread massively to the remote areas."

Meanwhile, the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) said the Delta variant of the Sars-Cov-2 has been the dominant factor in the ongoing rise in infection.

"Delta variant was found in 45 percent of the total samples [on which genome sequencing was done] in May and 78 percent in June," reads the Covid-19 situation report of IEDCR released on Sunday.

IEDCR said they have so far completed genome sequencing of 646 Covid-19 variants between December 2020 and June 2021.

While the number of Covid-19 patients being treated in the hospitals across the country has increased by

267 percent in the past two weeks till Sunday, the health officials said half the Covid-19 patients in hospitals are from villages.

"We have had a virtual meeting with the officials of 45 upazila health complexes. They said most of the patients are coming from villages and they are coming in at a critical state," Prof Abul Bashar Mohhammad Khurshid Alam, the director general of the DGHS told journalists, following the meeting at his office yesterday.

Many people are not aware of Covid-19 and they are considering it as "normal flu", he said.

Dr Mohammad Shahidullah, president of the National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) on Covid-19 told The Daily Star, "There is no alternative to the enforcement of health safety guidelines to curb the outbreak. Even if the ongoing lockdown is eased after July 14, enforcement of health protocols is a must."

Deprived of oxygen, 4 Covid patients die in Pabna hospital

UNB, Pabna

At least four Covid patients died at Pabna General Hospital in 24 hours till yesterday noon, allegedly due to a shortage of oxygen supply.

The deceased are: Rashida Begum, 70, Rokeya Khatun, 70, Nure Alam, 67, and Najmul Islam, 72.

Speaking to UNB on condition of anonymity, a senior doctor at the hospital said, "The hospital is seeing a crisis of oxygen as the number of Covid patients increased in the last few days. Many had to arrange oxygen cylinders personally. These patients died due to disruption in oxygen supply."

Alamgir Hossain, son of deceased Rashida, said he got his mother admitted to the hospital around noon on Sunday with fever and breathing problems.

"Seeing the shortage of oxygen at the hospital, I requested the authorities about 10 times to arrange oxygen for my mother. But she breathed her last gasping for oxygen."

He said at least three more patients died in front of his eyes gasping for oxygen.

Mamun Hossain, brother of a patient admitted to the Covid ward, complained that the hospital management and health services have collapsed.

"My sister was admitted 12 days ago. She gave samples for Covid testing a day later, but she is yet to receive the test result," he said.

Regarding the deaths, Dr Saleh Mohammad Ali, acting assistant director of the hospital, said: "Most of the patients came at the last stage when there was little left to be done for saving their lives."

There is no central oxygen supply system at the hospital. Oxygen was being supplied to patients through a manifold system, which was not enough for the large number of patients and it created the crisis, he added.

Pabna Civil Surgeon Monisor Chowdhury said 139 people were infected with Covid-19 in the district in the 24 hours.

With this, the district's death toll reached 28 and the total caseload stood at 5,341.

The district's infection rate is 21.35 percent, he said.

UNO made OSD after he slapped a fine on doctor

STAR REPORT

Chattogram's Satkania upazila nirbahi officer has been withdrawn and made officer on special duty two days after he fined a doctor for violating lockdown.

Besides, an executive magistrate, who fined another physician for violating lockdown in Habiganj on Saturday, returned him the money yesterday.

The public administration ministry issued the UNO's withdrawal order on Sunday, but did not mention any reason.

Contacted, Chattogram's Divisional Commissioner Kamrul Hasan on Sunday confirmed that he got the order, and said, "The AC land of the upazila will perform the additional charge of UNO until further order."

Asked, Kamrul said he did not know whether the order had any connection with the incident of fining a doctor.

On Friday afternoon, UNO Nazrul Islam conducted a mobile court in Satkania to enforce the lockdown. At that time, Farhad Kabir was going to his private chamber in the upazila. The mobile court halted him and fined him Tk 1,000.

The incident triggered protest from doctors as they claimed it was not a violation of the lockdown. They also demanded withdrawal and punishment of the UNO.

"If doctors cannot attend chambers, how will patients receive treatment?" said Faisal Iqbal Chowdhury, general secretary of Bangladesh Medical Association's Chattogram chapter.

In a separate incident of Habiganj's Aimeriganj upazila, an executive magistrate, who earlier fined a doctor for violating the lockdown, yesterday returned the money.

The local administration said the money was given back following the doctor's appeal. However, the doctor claimed that the government officials asked him to appeal.

On Saturday, Executive Magistrate Shoaib Shat-el Ivan fined Rezaul Karim, owner of Popular Physiotherapy in the upazila's Kakailcheo Bazar area, Tk 20,000 for violating the lockdown.

He was fined because crowd was created at his physiotherapy centre, said the magistrate.

Yesterday afternoon, a staff of the magistrate's office went to Rezaul's home and returned the money.

Contacted, Aimeriganj Upazila Nirbahi Officer Matur Rahman Khan said the money was given back as the doctor had appealed for it.

However, the physician yesterday told The Daily Star that the government official came to his house with an application form and asked him to sign it for getting the money.

"So, I signed the application form. Then, the official returned the money," said the doctor.

[Our Chattogram and Moulvibazar correspondents contributed to this report.]