

BANGLADESH UPDATE



11,525
New cases in 24hrs



9,66,406
Total cases



15,392
Deaths



8,39,082
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE



4,004,983
Deaths



185,192,807
Total cases

PFIZER SHOTS

Outbound migrants face trouble registering

JAMIL MAHMUD

A number of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait bound migrant workers yesterday failed to register with Surokkha app for Covid vaccine, even though they said to have completed the prerequisite Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training registration.

The workers said they faced problems regarding passport "verification", which is required for further progress during the vaccine registration. Some also lacked technical knowledge.

The government made Surokkha app, developed for nationwide Covid-19 vaccine registration, available for migrant workers from Monday afternoon, incorporating a new feature in it for them.

Md Mamun, a Kuwait-based migrant worker who returned home on vacation in January, said for BMET registration, he submitted required documents to the Dhaka District Employment and Manpower Office housed on the capital's Prohashi Kalyan Bhaban on Sunday.

He said upon submitting the documents, officials assured him that they would further process the documents and that he would be able to register with Surokkha app later.

Mamun said he himself tried to do the registration via mobile phone yesterday but failed. Later, he went to a nearby computer shop in the city's Shanir Akhra to complete the registration.

"However, an operator there took my passport number and date of birth and he later said the [registration] process was not working at this moment," he added.

He added that two of his fellow migrant workers outside Dhaka also tried to get registered with Surokkha but failed.

Nazrul Islam, Saudi Arabia-based worker who came home in February, said he registered with the BMET through Ami Prohashi app on Saturday.

The expatriate said he could not complete his registration despite attempting several times from Monday afternoon to night.

After giving passport number and

date of birth, a message appeared citing the "verification" is not completed, he added.

He said his visa will expire after July 13, while his flight date is on July 10.

"Thinking that getting vaccine will be impossible within this short time, I have already confirmed hotel booking in Saudi Arabia for quarantine," he added.

He further said other migrant workers known to him also could not complete their registration with Surokkha app yesterday.

Asked, Debabrata Ghosh, assistant director at Cumilla District Employment and Manpower Office, said both the BMET and Surokkha app registration processes are linked to the server of the passport authorities.

There is a possibility that the process can show "pending" if data is not generated from the passport database, he said.

It could also happen that such migrant workers' BMET registration have not been completed yet, he told this newspaper by phone.

Under the BMET registration process, about 20,000 to 21,000 migrant workers have registered between Saturday and Monday, according to the expatriates' welfare ministry.

On the other hand, health authorities said they would inoculate up to 1,400 migrant workers, who are waiting to travel to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, with Pfizer vaccine shots each day at seven hospitals in the capital.

Meanwhile, Quazi Md Rashid Un Nabi, director of Sir Salimullah Medical College Hospital (SSMCH), yesterday said they would start administering the workers with the jabs from today.

He said they got the names of over 250 eligible migrant workers for Pfizer vaccine doses.

The vaccination centre at SSMCH is one of the seven centres in the capital where migrant workers can get Pfizer vaccine jabs.

The government decided to vaccinate Saudi Arabia and Kuwait bound migrant workers with Pfizer shots as it is one of the four vaccines approved in the Middle East countries.



Construction workers wait for work in the capital's Baridhara around noon on Monday. They come to this area early morning every day, but hardly find any work amid the ongoing "strict lockdown". The workers are now struggling to make ends meet.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

Not reaching the targeted

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11.7 crore and 23,630 tonnes of rice for the people hard hit by natural disasters and Covid-19.

Experts fear that people may come out of their homes by any means if the government fails to feed those in need.

"The failure to feed people will have two impacts. They will get angry and lose faith in the government," said Prof Be-Nazir Ahmed, former director of disease control at the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

"Secondly, they will violate the lockdown which may turn out to be disastrous for the country," he told The Daily Star.

Pointing to the worsening state of the Covid-19 pandemic in the country, he cautioned that there would be a severe disaster if the government fails to keep people at home.

"We needed to chalk out the execution plan beforehand. But we did not do that. You cannot expect good results from a half-hearted initiative," Prof Be-Nazir added.

SITUATION IN DISTRICTS

Low-income groups, including petty traders and day labourers, have been badly affected as they became jobless due to the nationwide lockdown, which began on July 1 and has been extended until July 14.

Take the cobblers of Brahmanbaria as an example.

About 700 cobblers, who struggle to earn a living by mending shoes, live in Bhadughar of Brahmanbaria municipality area. After last year's prolonged countrywide shutdown, they had attempted to rebound but their business was hurt after Hefajat-e-Islam's mayhem in late March this year, which led the authorities to shut down the

railway station in the district.

The ongoing lockdown is now adding salt to their wounds.

"I used to make about Tk 500 to Tk 700 per day mending and polishing shoes of people at the train station. Now I'm completely jobless," he said, adding that they are yet to get any aid from the government.

"I can't describe how I feel when I look at my hungry children and parents' faces," he said in a choked voice.

A well-known dhak player, Raj Kumar Wrishti of Mymensingh city's Wrishtipara area said he is almost starving along with his family of seven.

He claimed that he was not enlisted for any relief during this lockdown.

The state of Ranjit Biswas, a 58-year-old saloon worker in Mymensingh's Naumahal area, was similar.

Mymensingh Deputy Commissioner Mohammad Enamul Haque on Saturday said they received the government's relief and were preparing a list of beneficiaries.

Violating the stay-at-home order, Md Polish, a roadside teastall owner at Kalitola area under Dinajpur municipality, had opened his shop, but a magistrate closed it down eventually.

"I have not earned a single taka for over a week. How do I feed my family? We don't have savings to survive, and neither do we have any government support. It is not possible to bear family expenses without the support now," Polish said.

In Dinajpur, the local administration imposed a lockdown on June 15.

Liakat Ali, 65, who runs a small betel leaf shop in Kalitola area, said his family is facing hardships after as his shop has been closed for more than two weeks.

"I have lost the only means of earning after the lockdown. I took a loan to feed

my family members."

He said he received support from many people last year but this year he had not seen any such activities.

Abdur Razzak, a day labourer of Pirojpur, said he has been jobless for around a month after he fractured his leg in an accident.

"But I have not gotten any help yet," he said.

Golam Sarwar Babul, chairman of Parerhat union parishad in Pirojpur's Indurkani upazila, said the support they had gotten from the government was at best 20 percent of the demand.

"So, it becomes difficult for us to help all who are in need," he said.

Enamul Haque, secretary of Gabtoli union of Bogura, said they gave Tk 500 each to 250 people on Thursday.

"A family could hardly run daily expenses for two days with Tk 500. They will have to come out of home on the third day," he said.

Dalim Shikdar, member of Khondakata union of Bagerhat, said the incidents of theft has increased recently in their area.

Upazila Nirbahi Officer Sharif Ahmed Linkon of Rajshahi's Bagmara said they are yet to get allocation from the Tk 23.6 crore disbursed by DDM.

Asked why many people did not get the aid yet, State Minister of the disaster management ministry Enamur Rahman said, "Everyone [those needing the aid] will get it. We've increased the amount of aid."

If the lockdown is extended, the government will allocate more, he added.

[Our Correspondents from Brahmanbaria, Dinajpur, Mymensingh, Pirojpur and Gazipur contributed to the report]

Nasal cannula crisis

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and 15 hospitals have zero high-flow nasal cannulas, as per the DGHS data. This is the situation even though almost all hospitals have supply from central oxygen plants.

On July 2, six Covid patients died at Bogura's Mohammad Ali District Hospital. The hospital had only two high-flow nasal cannulas against its eight Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds.

On that day, the hospital's superintendent told our correspondent in the district that there were many patients requiring high-flow oxygen support. "We are using over a hundred non-rebreather masks. But elderly patients are suffering due to the shortage of high-flow oxygen support," the superintendent, Nuruzzaman, said.

After the news of the deaths spread, the hospital received 17 new high-flow cannulas from private donations.

Munshiganj General Hospital has zero high-flow nasal cannulas, meaning it cannot take care of critical Covid-19 patients. It has a central oxygen plant which can carry up to 5,600 litres, but no way the hospital can deliver it to critical patients.

The hospital's Covid-19 unit's coordinator Md Jobayer Islam told our district correspondent that last week they had to refer four patients to Dhaka as they needed high-flow nasal cannulas, even though they had the oxygen.

"We also know that many patients come to the hospital and then choose to go to Dhaka themselves, but we do not know what that number is," said Jobayer Islam. "But only providing us with high-flow nasal cannulas will not be enough, we also need an ICU and physicians who can give critical care."

Nilphamari District Hospital has one nasal cannula and 181 patients were admitted to the hospital, reported our correspondent yesterday.

The hospital has a newly-built central oxygen supply system with a tank capacity of up to 5,600 litres of oxygen that can be catered to 200 patients.

Our correspondent reported that on July 5, 171 people were tested, and 68 were found positive, putting the positivity rate of the district at 39 percent -- much higher than the national rate.

The three CHT hospitals of Bandarban, Khagrachhari and Rangamati have a total of five high-flow nasal cannulas.

"Even though we installed an oxygen supply system in January, there is only one high-flow nasal cannula in Khagrachhari Sadar Hospital," said its Resident Medical Officer Ripon Bappi.

Similarly, Bandarban Civil Surgeon Aung Swi Prue Marma said although there was a central oxygen supply system installed in the district, there are only three high-flow nasal cannulas.

Rokibul Alam, resident medical officer of Thakurgaon District Hospital, for example, said in the hospital patients were having to take turns in using six high-flow nasal cannulas.

"Out of 200 beds, 145 beds are currently filled. Critical patients are being sent to Dinajpur and Rangpur. We can be in trouble any moment," he told our correspondent in the district.

Since Khulna's surrounding districts do not have adequate critical care services, Khulna Medical College Hospital has to bear the brunt.

Before the Covid-19, we had to refill our oxygen tank once every 15-20 days. Now we have to refill it every two days. Even after that we find that the oxygen pressure drops around dawn," said KMCH's RMO Shubhash Ranjan Halder.

Meanwhile, with growing consumption of oxygen at the hospitals has caused pressure on the supply chain.

During the past several days, the daily demand for medical oxygen has increased to 210 tonnes from the normal-time demand of 100 tonnes, according to the DGHS.

Linde Bangladesh Ltd, a private oxygen producer which supplies around 90 percent of the usual national demand, has two liquid oxygen production plants—one in Narayanganj's Roopganj and the other in Chattogram's Sitolpur.

These two plants can produce around 90 tonnes of liquid oxygen daily.

Saiqa Mazed, spokesperson for Linde Bangladesh, told The Daily Star yesterday, "Earlier, we used to send our tankers to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital once a week. We are doing it twice a week now as the demand has gone up."

"Although we have kept backups to meet more demand, it will be tough if the demand grows even further. Because, transportation with safety is always an important issue," she added.

Prof Mohammed Atiqur Rahman, chairman, Respiratory Medicine Department and Treasurer of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, said, "More high-flow nasal cannulas are needed but oxygen plants also need to have the capacity to cater to them. Private companies should come forward to resolve the crisis."

As the hospitals were running out of medical oxygen during March and April, the health officials said they would buy 40 mobile oxygen generators to meet the rising demand during the crisis.

Later on May 19, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs okayed a proposal from the Central Medicine Store Depot (CMSD) to buy those generators in a direct procurement method.

Yet, when the country continues to reel from another surge of Covid-19 and patients are dying due to the shortage of oxygen, the CMSD officials said they have ordered three generators from Europe which will reach the country by the first half of August.

Meanwhile, the health ministry has formed a technical committee to decide the procurement protocols on the price and other issues on the remaining 37 generators.

"We expect to get three generators by the first week of August. To decide about the other 37 generators, the technical committee will sit in a meeting soon," Abu Hena Morshed Zaman, director of the CMSD, told The Daily Star on Saturday.

He also said, "We have been getting many requests from hospitals for high-flow nasal cannulas and we try our best to help them. But the thing is that unless they have ICUs, they should not need these cannulas."

[Our Bogura, Munshiganj, Nilphamari, Bandarban and Khulna correspondents contributed to this report]

Fan out across the country

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They also alleged that there were some anomalies in the transfer orders.

For example, Dr Jibesh Kumar Pramanik, who worked at Bogura's Shaheed Ziaur Rahman Medical College, died from Covid in January this year. But his name was on the list which showed he was transferred to the 250-bed Mohammad Ali Hospital.

The HSD, however, amended the list later and issued a revised circular, excluding the names of three doctors including Jibesh.

"This will create chaos in the country's healthcare system because the transfers were made in an unplanned way," said Dr Ehteshamul Haque Chowdhury Dulal, secretary general of Bangladesh Medical Association (BMA).

"The transfer orders were issued

without mentioning designations and service code numbers," he told this newspaper yesterday.

"We fail to understand the reason for stirring up a new trouble in the healthcare system in such a situation when doctors across the country are working hard to deal with Covid patients."

Criticising the ministry officials, he said, "They [ministry officials] have no idea about the rules of business of a professor at a medical college or any other healthcare officials."

The ministry could have talked to the health directorate and the medical education directorate before making such a decision, he observed.

Dr Rezaul Karim, director in-charge of Cumilla Medical College Hospital, thinks such sudden transfers would hamper healthcare services.

Pros, cons of alternatives being weighed

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including holding of SSC and HSC exams. Right now we are not in a position to talk in details about the alternatives, but we will announce it soon," said Prof Syed Md Golam Faruk, director general of the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE).

Usually, SSC, HSC and their equivalent exams take place in February and April each year. But the education boards cannot hold the exams this year as all educational institutions remain closed since March 17 last year due to the pandemic.

The closure has been extended till July 31 in phases.

Around 20 lakh students sat for SSC and its equivalent exams and 13 lakh for HSC and its equivalent exams in the last few years.

The government had thought of holding this year's public exams on shortened syllabuses. It had planned that SSC and HSC exams would be held after conducting in-person classes for 60 days and 84 days respectively.

But conducting in-person classes became uncertain due to the worsening Covid situation. Against this backdrop, the DSHE last month started the process of giving SSC and HSC examinees assignments. It asked students to submit those to schools.

On June 13, Education Minister Dipu Moni said the government was considering alternatives to SSC and HSC exams if those could not be held on shortened syllabuses due to the pandemic.

Officials at the education ministry, DSHE and Dhaka education board said they were thinking about the pros and cons of several alternatives. They said there are possibilities that SSC and HSC candidates would be evaluated based on their results in previous public exams and assignments.

The HSC results can be prepared after coordinating 50 percent of the SSC, 25 percent of Junior School Certificate (JSC) and 25 percent of assignment results.

The SSC results might be prepared after coordinating 50 percent of JSC and 50 percent of assignment results.

Officials said they were also considering reduction of subjects in exams. For example, examinees might be allowed to take one paper each from Bengali and English subjects carrying 100 marks each. Candidates usually take two papers from each of the subjects.

Dhaka education board Chairman Prof Nehal Ahmed said they were working on conducting exams and alternatives keeping in mind the Covid situation.

"For example, a doctor, who is a professor at our medical college, is also serving as the in-charge of the ICU at our medical college hospital. But now he has been transferred elsewhere to work in a Covid unit. How will we operate our ICU unit now?"

Contacted, Dr Sheikh Md Hasan Imam, director (admin) at the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), said the health ministry officials might have made the decision, thinking that the doctors working at medical colleges only teach students.

"But the reality is that all the doctors, who work at medical colleges, simultaneously discharge duties at medical college hospitals. Such transfers will create problems in providing healthcare services," he pointed out.

Iran says Saudi talks progress but time needed to resolve disputes

REUTERS, Dubai

Iran yesterday reported "good progress" in talks with regional rival Saudi Arabia but said some of their disputes are complex and may take time to resolve.

Saudi Arabia and Gulf allies continue to pressure Iran, which backs the opposite side in conflicts in the region, over its nuclear programme, which Tehran says is entirely peaceful, its ballistic missiles, and its support for militant groups.

Iran has criticised the Gulf Arab states' close ties with Tehran's long-term foe Washington and moves by some of them to normalize relations with Israel, a country that Iran - which supports the Palestinians - does not recognise.

Five officials OSD

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deputy commissioner); former UNO of Munshiganj Sadar, Rubayet Hayat; and Assistant Commissioner of Munshiganj Sheikh Mezbah-ul-Saberin.

Actions are being taken by the public administration ministry following a directive from the Prime Minister's Office.

Mahbub Hossain, project director of Ashrayan Project-2, told a TV reporter that his department was aware of questionable construction work in 36 upazilas of 22 districts.

"We are investigating each and every case. Departmental actions as per the service rules will surely be taken against the officials found guilty," he added.

He said the allegations against certain officials include bribery and the use of poor-quality building materials that resulted in cracks on the walls and flooded floors only after moderate rain.

The action may include termination from the job or no annual increment, he added.

On June 25, twenty-one houses built in Sarishabari, Jamalpur, got flooded after moderate rain. The 21 landless families who moved in to the houses only about six months ago were forced to leave. The houses were constructed at a cost of Tk 35.70 lakh.

In May in Bogura's Sherpur, seven out of 22 houses built under the Ashrayan Project-2 partially collapsed after moderate rain.

The houses on the bank of Burigara canal cost Tk 38.50 lakh. They were handed to 22 homeless families in January as gift in Mujib Borsho.

Ahmad Kaikaus, principal secretary to the prime minister, told Somoy TV that upazila-level officials implemented the project.

"Failure in such a project... means our failure. This is embarrassing. We would show zero tolerance. There is no reason to show leniency," he added.

"We repeatedly said that we will not tolerate sloppiness. Unfortunately, such incidents have taken place in many areas."

He said certain officials implemented the project without examining what infrastructure should have been there at the outset.

"In some cases, we have found lack of attention. We are not showing leniency towards the people who didn't pay attention or have been sloppy," he was quoted as saying.

Show-cause notices have been issued in some cases against the deputy commissioners who allegedly didn't pay the attention the project deserved.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on June 20 handed over 53,340 homes and land ownership documents to homeless and landless families across the country under the second phase of the Ashrayan Project.

Local government representatives and public servants, on behalf of the prime minister, handed over the documents of the houses on two decimals of land.

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

After reports of poor build-quality of the houses, officials at the PMO became disappointed, sources said.

The PMO directed deputy commissioners concerned to investigate into the allegations in districts including Madaripur, Gazipur, Manikganj, Brahmanbaria, Cumilla, Pabna, Bogura, Sirajganj, Natore, Kurigram, Barguna, Mymensingh, Netrakona, Jamalpur.

The deputy commissioners later formed committees to probe the allegations.

Besides, a team of officials from the PMO visited all the sites and found that irregularities and negligence in construction work.

The DCs were asked to submit their probe reports to the PMO, sources said.

Daily Covid cases

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The total number of recoveries now stands at 8,44,515 and the recovery rate is 87.39 percent.

Among the 163 deceased, 98 were men and 65 women. Of them, five were within 21-30 years old, 11 were aged between 31 and 40, 27 between 41 and 50, 29 between 51 and 60 and 91 were aged above 60 years.