

## IOM helped 1,473 migrants

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than Bangladesh last year. The UN body supported the majority 37,043 returns under the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes.

Besides, 4,038 migrants were assisted in returning from Libya and Yemen under Voluntary Humanitarian Return (VHR) programme, as well as 1,100 stranded migrants assisted under the Covid-19 Return Task Force.

Despite fewer migrants assisted in their return home in 2020, the IOM maintained a high level of reintegration support, with 121 country offices in host or transit countries and in countries of origin providing 106,230 reintegration services, the report says.

In a media release on Friday, the IOM said border closures and mobility restrictions imposed by governments worldwide in response to the pandemic last year posed unprecedented challenges to its return and reintegration activities.

"This publication demonstrates that despite the challenging circumstances posed by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, IOM continued to provide critical assistance to migrants returning to their countries of origin in a safe and dignified manner," said Yitna Getachew, head of IOM's Migrant Protection and Assis-

tance Division.

As a consequence of the pandemic, the number of beneficiaries of AVRR in 2020 decreased by 43 percent (from 64,958 in 2019 to 37,043 in 2020), the report says.

In addition, the number of beneficiaries of VHR decreased by 73 percent (from 15,248 in 2019 to 4,038 in 2020).

Globally, Niger remained the main host country of migrants assisted in returning home, with a total of 9,069 migrants, confirming the trend of increasing numbers of beneficiaries returning from transit countries.

Germany was the second largest host country with 5,723 migrants who were assisted in returning to their countries of origin.

On the other hand, the European Economic Area remained the main host region with a share of 39.4 percent of the total number of migrants assisted to return in 2020, down from 43.5 percent in the previous year.

West and Central Africa remained the main region of origin with a share of 35.9 percent of the total number of migrants assisted to return in 2020.

Migrants assisted to return within the same region made up 40 percent of the total. The majority of those movements took place within West and Central Africa (65 percent).



The charred remnants of homes and buildings, destroyed by a wildfire on June 30, are seen during a media tour by authorities in Lytton, British Columbia, Canada, on Friday. Canada on Friday ordered trains to cease operations for 48 hours in areas of British Columbia hit by a recent spate of wildfires, the transport ministry said in a statement.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Space tourism set to begin

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venture by launching himself to the final frontier.

Branson's Virgin Galactic Holding Inc is due today to send the company's passenger rocket plane, the VSS Unity, on its first fully crewed test flight to the edge of space, with the British billionaire founder among the six individuals strapping in for the ride.

The gleaming white spaceplane will be borne by a twin-fuselage carrier jet dubbed VMS Eve (named for Branson's mother) to an altitude of 50,000 feet, where Unity will be released and soar by rocket power in an almost vertical climb through the outer fringe of Earth's atmosphere.

At the apex of its flight some 55 miles (89 km) above the New Mexico desert, the crew will experience a few minutes of weightlessness before making a gliding descent back to Earth.

If all goes according to plan, the flight will last about 90 minutes and end where it began - on a runway at Spaceport America near the aptly named town of Truth or Consequences.

Virgin's Unity 22 mission marks the 22nd test flight of the spacecraft, and the company's fourth crewed mission beyond Earth's atmosphere.

But it will be the first to carry a full complement of space travelers - two pilots and four "mission specialists," Branson among them.

Although the mission is seen as a potential milestone in helping transform citizen rocket travel into

a mainstream commercial venture, spaceflight remains an inherently hazardous endeavor.

An earlier prototype of the Virgin Galactic rocket plane crashed during a test flight over California's Mojave Desert in 2014, killing one pilot and seriously injuring another.

If successful, Sunday's flight will also give Branson bragging rights to besting rival Jeff Bezos and his space company, Blue Origin, in what has been popularized as a "billionaire space race." Bezos, founder of online retail giant Amazon.com, is slated to fly aboard Blue Origin's suborbital rocketship, the New Shepard, later this month.

Virgin Galactic and Blue Origin, along with fellow billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk's SpaceX, are competing head-to-head in the emerging business of space tourism, though Musk has a big head start.

SpaceX, which plans to send its first all-civilian crew (without Musk into orbit in September, has already launched numerous cargo payloads and astronauts to the International Space Station.

Branson, 70, insists there is plenty of demand from wealthy would-be citizen astronauts to go around, and that he had no intention of trying to upstage Bezos.

The company has said it has received more than 600 flight reservations, priced at around \$250,000 per ticket, but hopes eventually to slash the cost of each seat to \$40,000.

## Biden presses Putin to act

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now set up a means of communications on a regular basis "when each of us thinks something is happening in another country that affects the home country."

"And so it went well. I'm optimistic," he said.

The United States has not indicated how it plans to respond to the attacks emanating from Russia. Biden, asked if there would be consequences to Russian inaction, said: "Yes."

"We're not going to telegraph what those actions will be precisely - some of them will be manifest and visible, some of them may not be - but we expect those to take place, you know, in the days and weeks ahead," a senior Biden administration official told reporters.

Ransomware is a breed of malicious software that hackers use to hold data hostage in exchange for payment. It has become an increasingly powerful scourge for businesses across the world. Cybercriminals have used it to paralyze thousands of American organizations, setting off a series of increasingly high-profile crises.

Many of the gangs carrying out the ransomware attacks are alleged by American officials and cybersecurity researchers to be operating out of Russia with the awareness, if not the approval, of the government there.

Biden hinted at digital retaliation if Russian cooperation was not forthcoming, responding "yes" when asked by a Reuters reporter whether it

would make sense to attack the Russian servers used in such intrusions.

Moscow and Washington disagreed over whether the United States had formally sought Russian assistance to rein in ransomware attacks.

A Kremlin statement said Putin noted to Biden that Russia "had not received any requests from the relevant US departments in the last month despite the readiness of the Russian side to jointly stop crime in the sphere of information."

The senior Biden administration official disputed this statement, telling reporters in a conference call that multiple requests had been made by the United States to Russia through normal diplomatic channels.

Internet crime has bedeviled US-Russian relations since the 1990s, when American cyber experts first began complaining of spam emails from Russia. But the disruptive power of ransomware has taken the issue to a new level.

In May cybercriminals alleged to be operating from Russia froze the operations of critical fuel transport group Colonial Pipeline, setting off gasoline shortages, price spikes and panic buying on the U.S. East Coast.

The following month a different Russia-linked group struck meatpacker JBS, briefly disrupting its food supply chain. Last week the same hackers claimed responsibility for a mass ransomware outbreak centered on Florida IT firm Kaseya.

## US, France expand special forces cooperation

AFP, Washington

The US and French defense chiefs signed a new "roadmap" for cooperation between their special operations forces Friday as both seek to build international efforts to counter non-state threats like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group.

French Defense Minister Florence Parly signed the pact at the Pentagon with her counterpart Lloyd Austin, on a visit that came as the US pulls out of Afghanistan and France cuts its

counter-terror operations in Africa's Sahel region.

"In the face of terrorism, our special forces have developed a true brotherhood of arms. This convention will deepen the exceptional ties that they have forged," Parly said in a tweet after the two met.

Pentagon spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Anton Semelroth called the roadmap "a statement of intent to broaden cooperation in all areas of special operations."

## Dhaka now worst affected by Delta

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The number of new cases has also risen by 37.54 percent during the same period, according to a DGHS press release.

At least 8,722 new cases were recorded yesterday with a positivity rate of 31.46 percent. It took the number of Covid cases to 73,059 this week compared to 53,118 cases detected the previous week, the DGHS data said.

The rising death in Dhaka division suggested that the pandemic situation in this region is turning as bad as in Khulna and Rajshahi.

As the number of Covid-19 cases and death continue to rise in Dhaka, the government has decided to convert the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) Convention Centre into a 1,000-bed field hospital for Covid-19 patients.

"There will be 400 intensive care units (ICU) and 400 beds in high dependency unit (HDU)," Health Minister Zahid Maleque told reporters at a press conference at the convention centre yesterday.

VACCINE  
Meanwhile, in the same event

yesterday, the minister Zahid Maleque said 60 lakh doses of Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine would arrive in the country under Covax facilities in the beginning of next month.

He said the World Health Organization had sent a letter to the Bangladesh government on Friday, informing the latter about the development.

Besides, 50 lakh doses of the purchased Chinese Sinopharm vaccine would arrive either at the end of this month or at the beginning of next month, the minister said.

"We are expecting to get one to one and a half crore doses of vaccines in our hand within the next one and a half months."

The country's mass vaccination campaign has already gained a pace with 25 lakh doses of Moderna vaccine from Covax and 20 lakh doses from Sinopharm.

The Covax is a global initiative coordinated by the World Health Organization, Vaccine Alliance Gavi, and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations. It was formed to ensure that low- and middle-income countries have

equitable access to Covid vaccines.

As the age bar is lowered from 40 years to 35 years, more than 12 lakh people have registered for the vaccination.

The vaccination campaign, which started on February 7, stumbled due to the suspension of vaccine supplies by the Serum Institute of India amid a surge in daily new cases and deaths there.

Bangladesh and Serum had an agreement that the latter would ship three crore shots of the Oxford vaccine in phases to Bangladesh between January and June.

Serum delivered the first 50 lakh doses in January, but shipped only 20 lakh the following month. No shipment has been made since. Besides, India sent 3.3 million doses as a gift to Bangladesh.

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

The government resumed administering the first dose on June 19 on a limited scale with 11 lakh doses of the Sinopharm China sent as a gift.

## Delta puts brakes on post-Covid normality

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economics and daily life to recover.

The European Union -- lambasted early on in the pandemic response for a botched vaccine acquisition programme -- yesterday said it has delivered enough shots to cover 70 percent of the bloc's population.

"By tomorrow, some 500 million doses will have been distributed to all regions of Europe," EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said.

But according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, the proportion of adults aged 18 years or over fully vaccinated in the EU and European Economic Area is still only 44.1 percent.

Supply shortages in South Korea have meant only about 11 percent of the country's 52 million population is fully vaccinated, according to health authorities.

The nation, held up as a model of how to combat the pandemic, reported 1,378 new coronavirus cases yesterday, a third straight record high.

From tomorrow, gatherings of more than two people will be banned after 6:00 pm, schools, bars and clubs will be closed.

In Pakistan, where less than eight percent of the population has been vaccinated, the government said only those who had received jabs would be allowed to fly.

"We could face dangerous consequences if we do not take steps to control the Delta variant," the National Command and Operation Centre said in a statement.

The country of around 215 million people has largely escaped the worst of the pandemic, with under a million

recorded infections and around 23,000 deaths -- although cases are on the rise again.

After an "exponential" rise in cases in recent days, officials in the autonomous northeastern Spanish region of Catalan said they had no choice but to reimpose restrictions.

Nightclubs will close and a negative Covid-19 test or proof of vaccination will be needed to take part in outdoor activities involving more than 500 people.

Russia also announced that cases continued to surge and it had a new record number of daily deaths, the fifth since the beginning of the month.

The 752 new deaths yesterday bring Russia's total toll to 142,253. The country also recorded 25,082 new infections, meaning there have been more than 5.7 million cases.

Less than 20 percent of Russians have received a single dose, despite shots of locally developed vaccines being readily available.

Meanwhile, a White House official said on Friday that The United States was shipping 3 million doses of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine to Indonesia, with another 1.5 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine heading to Nepal and 500,000 Moderna doses to Bhutan.

The shipments are part of the Biden administration's pledge to share an initial batch of 80 million US-made vaccines globally amid concern about the wide disparity in vaccination rates between advanced and developing countries.

While vaccines have been successful in mitigating the worst effects of infections, concerns have been raised

about how well some of them will cope with more virulent strains.

In Indonesia, which is fighting a ferocious wave of infections, more than a dozen fully inoculated frontline health workers have died, according to the country's medical association.

Authorities said on Friday that medics would be given a third booster jab using the vaccine made by US company Moderna, to provide them extra protection.

The Southeast Asian nation has been depending heavily on China's Sinovac shots amid the global shortage of alternatives that have been mostly supplied to rich nations.

In another development, an advisory panel of the World Health Organization on Friday said that the benefits of mRNA Covid-19 vaccines outweigh the very small risk they might cause heart inflammation, as the jabs reduce hospitalisations and deaths.

In a statement, the WHO said that reports of two rare conditions - myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart, and of its lining, called pericarditis - had typically occurred within days of vaccination, mainly among younger males after the second dose.

"Very rare cases of myocarditis and pericarditis have been observed following vaccination with the mRNA COVID-19 vaccines," it said, referring to the two vaccines using such technology, by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna.

"The benefits of mRNA Covid-19 vaccines outweigh the risks in reducing hospitalizations and deaths due to Covid-19 infections," it said.

## The North praying

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of West Ichli village in Gangachara upazila.

"We are facing an acute crisis of food and drinking water," said Sultana Begum, a victim of the same village.

Contacted local administration officials said they were arranging sufficient food assistance and drinking water for the flood-hit people, while WDB officials claimed that they were working to protect river erosion by using geobags.

In Lalmonirhat, at least 40 villages and Chars have been inundated in the last three days affecting around 15,000 people.

The Teesta river was flowing above 10 centimetre above the danger level. It may rise further if the onrush of water from upstream continues, said Mizanur Rahman, executive engineer of WDB in the district.

"My house and croplands have been remaining under water for around three days," said Badiar Rahman, 60, of Sadar upazila's Kalmati village.

"Boat has become the lone mode of communications in our area as all of our roads have been submerged," said Afzal Hossain, 62, a resident of Chouraha village in Aditmari upazila.

In Tangail, erosion of the Jamuna river has taken a serious turn in Kalihati upazila.

Around 100 structures, including 17 dwelling houses and 26 shops, at Bhairabbari and Alipur villages in the upazila were devoured by the river in the last two days.

"We have been demanding government's effective measure for a long time to end river erosion. But our demands remain unimplemented," said Abdul Malek of Gohaliabari village.

Vising the area, Kalihati upazila nirbahi officer (INO) Rumana Tanjin Antara told journalists that necessary measures would be taken regarding this matter.

Our correspondents from Dinajpur, Lalmonirhat and Tangail contributed to the report

## Peter Haas

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a senior advisor/deputy assistant secretary for trade policy and negotiations for the State Department. Prior to that, he was the deputy permanent representative to the US Mission to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in Paris.

He served in positions across five geographic bureaus of the State Department including as Consul General of the US Consulate General Mumbai, India.

Haas holds a BA in International Studies and German from Illinois Wesleyan University. He attended the London School of Economics as a Marshall Scholar, where he earned MSc (Econ) degrees in both the Politics of the World Economy and Comparative Government.

He is the recipient of the James Clement Dunn Award for Excellence and the Cordell Hull Award for Economic Achievement by Senior Officers.

## Sector Commanders

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rehabilitation, told reporters that 46 camps, each having 50,000 refugees, would house refugees in various areas including Madhya Pradesh, in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. Some camps had already been built, he said.

Khadilkar said that by July 11 about 6,763,000 East Pakistanis had crossed into India since the Pakistan Army began to crush the Bangladesh movement in March. Of the total, 3,163,000 were women and 1,135,000 were under 18, he added.

PAK DEADLINE FOR JOINING DUTY EXTENDED

The martial law authorities in East Pakistan extended the deadline for workers' joining work to July 20, 1971. The authorities earlier order had asked the workers to report for duty by June 30. But the order was mostly ignored by the workers. The present order was accompanied by an assurance that no penal measure would be taken against any worker for long absence and service continuity would be maintained.

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## Doctor in Tangail

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seriously hampered due to a shortage of doctors and nurses.

In another development, Abul Fazal Mohammad Shahabuddin, civil surgeon in Tangail, told The Daily Star that six more people died of the virus in the last 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday.

With the latest numbers, the total number of people who died in the district with coronavirus reached 156, he added.

The authorities tested 438 samples in those hours of whom 186 were identified infected. The infection rate is 42.46 percent. The total number of infected people was raised to 10,051 in the district and of this, he said.

AFP, Sri Ganganagar

Beating the merciless heat is hard in the Indian desert city of Sri Ganganagar, a reality facing millions across the vast country as the climate changes in the coming decades.

While people in richer nations can find some respite from a warming planet with air conditioners and other modern luxuries, many here -- and elsewhere in India -- don't even have running water.

Sri Ganganagar, in the desert state of Rajasthan near the Pakistan border, is regularly India's hottest place and temperatures of 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit) are nothing out of the ordinary.

So the district's two million people -- equivalent to the population of Slovenia -- get up early during the long summer months.

By late morning the sun is already

ferocious and the temperature a brutal 42 Celsius, and everyone soon retreats to their homes until early evening.

"By noon only those who can't avoid it are outside. We just sit under this," said fruit vendor Dinesh Kumar Shah, gesturing to his large black umbrella.

Only a lucky few have air conditioning, with most people using fans and cheaper air coolers -- in between power cuts -- and thick green curtains called tarpals to block out the sun.

"Us poor are hit the hardest," said local resident Kuldeep Kaur. "The ceiling fans at our homes just circulate the hot air."

"It is particularly difficult for young children at home in summers. But I guess there isn't much ordinary citizens can do about it. We just have to bear it."

Along the city's irrigation canals,

boys and men young and old -- but not women in socially conservative Rajasthan -- cool off in the muddy water.

Locals know the water-release schedules. It helps them with irrigating their crops, and tells them where they need to be for a dip.

"This is better than any fan or air-cooler," said Arjun Sarsar, 16, who has already spent four hours chilling, literally, with his friends.

India's average temperature rose around 0.7 Celsius between the beginning of the 20th century and 2018. It is set to rise another 4.4 degrees by 2100, according to a recent government report.

The study also forecasts the frequency of heatwaves by then to be three to four times higher than in 1976-2005, and they will last twice as long.