

BANGLADESH UPDATE

12,383
New cases in 24hrs

10,59,538
Total cases

17,052
Deaths

8,97,412
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

4,070,314
Deaths

188,964,880
Total cases

Over 9k held in 14-day lockdown

'Strict lockdown' withdrawn for a week from today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

More than 9,000 people were arrested in Dhaka in the 14-days "strict lockdown" as the government is relaxing the restrictions for eight days from today for the Eid-ul-Azha.

Besides, mobile courts fined 2,999 individuals and business establishments Tk 39.11 lakh while 8,139 vehicles were fined over Tk 1.83 crore for violating lockdown, according to Dhaka Metropolitan Police.

However, such action affected little as Dhaka and elsewhere were seeing a rise in public and vehicular movement every day with the spike in Covid-19 infections and deaths throughout the country.

There is a chance that Covid-19 transmissions will rise since the ongoing lockdown has been withdrawn for a week, health officials said yesterday.

Yesterday, traffic, crowds swelled up on Dhaka streets on the final day of lockdown. Large numbers of people and vehicles like private cars, motorbikes and rickshaws were seen on the streets.

There were gridlocks at different intersections including Panthapath, Karwan Bazar, Bijoy Sarani, Mouchak, Kakrail and Mohakhali areas in the capital.

Private cars, motorbikes and rickshaws dominated the city thoroughfares. The traffic police were busy directing traffic.

A private employee came to the office from Mohammadpur to Mohakhali around 10:30am. He said he had to face traffic jam at Manik Mia Avenue and Bijoy Sarani crossing for

some time.

A traffic sergeant who was on duty at a Farmgate checkpoint said more vehicles were on the road yesterday than any other day.

Like other days, kitchen markets also drew public gatherings, and vendors were seen roaming around the streets while many shops stayed open. Shopping malls, markets and big outlets were preparing to open their businesses from today ahead of Eid.

Laundry services, salons were also found open in some areas nearly after two weeks of closure.

"We reopened the laundry shop after 12 days as many people will need the services ahead of Eid," said a laundry service provider in the Shymoli area.

Meanwhile, DMP's mobile courts yesterday fined 105 persons over Tk 1.32 lakh and 744 vehicles over Tk 15.79 lakh for violating lockdown. Some 462 people were arrested on similar charges.

Outside Dhaka, gridlock was created in Brahmanbaria part of Cumilla-Sylhet highway due to repairing works on Langalbandh Bridge in Narayanganj.

Thousands of goods-carrying vehicles crowded the highway, making it almost impassable. Drivers and passengers were in distress, reports our Brahmanbaria correspondent.

The government imposed a seven-day nationwide "strict lockdown" from July 1. Later, it was extended till July 14.

But the government on Monday issued a circular relaxing the lockdown from July 15 to 6:00am of July 23. It will be re-imposed from July 23 to August 5.



Despite the strict lockdown, people gather at counters in Gabtoli Bus Terminal yesterday to buy tickets for their journeys from today onwards. Long-haul buses will ply today as the government has withdrawn the lockdown until the end of the Eid holidays.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Hospitals stretched to breaking point

FROM PAGE 1

11,000 in the last week and the positivity rate around 30 percent, experts fear healthcare facilities across the country including those in Dhaka may face a bigger crisis than it experienced in April this year if runaway infections are not reined in.

They say transmission has not come down as expected during the ongoing lockdown that started from the first day of July.

The Delta variant, far more transmissible than all other strains, has brought the healthcare system in India to its knees. And since its first detection in Bangladesh on May 8, this variant caused health disasters across Khulna and Rajshahi regions before reaching other parts of the country.

On Saturday, there were at least 11 patients -- five of them from outside Dhaka -- waiting to be admitted at the DNCC Covid-19 Dedicated Hospital in the capital between 3:15pm and 4:10pm.

Mongla Bishwas, 45, was one of them, having been brought to the country's biggest Covid facility with his oxygen saturation level at 75 percent. The on-duty nurse at the triage area said the patient needed high-flow oxygen therapy.

"However, not a single bed with high-flow nasal cannula was vacant. We will admit the patient anyway," the nurse said, preferring not to be named.

There were around 70 ICU beds officially vacant at the hospital at that time. Multiple staffers, however, said those ICU beds had no high-flow nasal cannula (HFNC), meaning no critical patient needing high-flow oxygen therapy can be treated in these ICU beds.

For the past week, the DNCC hospital has been receiving around 80 patients daily on an average, according to the officials.

As of yesterday noon, the hospital was treating 501 Covid patients, 481 of them in critical condition.

The patients were occupying 167 out of 212 ICU beds, all of the 288 HDU beds, and all of the 12 beds with HFNC. Only 40 patients were receiving treatment in general beds, numbering 500 at the hospital.

"Around 40 percent are coming at a critical point of their illnesses. But we cannot provide high-flow oxygen therapy at once to all of them as all HFNC beds have been remaining occupied for more than a week," an on-duty doctor at the hospital told The Daily Star seeking anonymity.

Due to several official embargos, including Thursday's one, imposed by the Dhaka Civil Surgeon office, none of the public healthcare staff are interested in being quoted in the media.

Contacted, Brig Gen AKM Nasir Uddin, director of the hospital, told

this newspaper that the rush for patients has increased in the past week.

"We still have vacant ICU beds as well as general beds. But our capacity will be exceeded soon if such a rush continues," Brig Gen AKM Nasir Uddin said.

While the DNCC hospital had many general beds vacant, Dhaka Medical College Hospital was close to surpassing its capacity as 92 percent of its 827 general beds were occupied on Sunday, according to the Covid dashboard data updated till July 11.

All the 20 ICU beds for Covid in Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) were occupied yesterday, according to the DGHS press release, while 55 out of 65 HFNC beds and 29 out of 37 HDU beds were engaged till Sunday.

DMCH Director Brigadier General Nazmul Haque told this newspaper on Sunday, "The rush of Covid patients has increased recently. But we are still capable of treating them with the resources we have."

Except for the DNCC hospital, there are 15 other public hospitals treating Covid patients in Dhaka city where the ICU bed occupancy rate was around 86 percent against a total 183 beds yesterday.

Besides, all 300 beds in Kurmitola General Hospital have been occupied for more than a week while the bed occupancy rate was 91 percent of 195 beds in Kuwait-Bangladesh Friendship Hospital, and 78 percent of 384 beds in Mugda General Hospital.

While official data shows more than 18 percent of ICU beds were vacant across the country, the reality, however, indicates a number of those are not fully equipped to treat critical patients or have remained dysfunctional, according to healthcare professionals treating Covid patients.

For instance, two out of total 10 ICU beds have remained dysfunctional for the last two weeks in the Covid unit of Rangpur Medical College Hospital while four out of 20 ICU beds in Sylhet's Shahid Shamsuddin Ahmed Hospital remained dysfunctional for several days, reports our district correspondents concerned.

The surge in patients has also put the oxygen supply chain under immense pressure as the daily demand has increased to 220 tonnes from 100 tonnes of the normal time, according to Dr Farid Hossain Miah, director of hospitals and clinics at the DGHS.

"As the number of patients is increasing, the demand for oxygen is also rising by three percent daily. We are trying our best to tackle the situation with what we have," Dr Farid told The Daily Star yesterday.

Due to the delay in filling up central oxygen tanks in at least three hospitals of Satkhira, Faridpur and Dhaka,

some 11 patients died in the past two weeks, reports our correspondents.

DIVISIONAL STATUS

The overall bed occupancy rate in Covid hospitals has more than doubled in all divisions in the past one month from June 14, according to the dashboard data of the Management Information System (MIS) unit of the health directorate.

In over one month till yesterday, Mymensingh division recorded the highest increase in overall bed occupancy rate -- from 22 percent to 111 percent -- followed by Rajshahi -- from 71 percent to 89 percent.

Meanwhile, Dhaka division saw a rise from 26 to 74 percent, Barisal from 26 to 67 percent, Khulna from 55 to 85 percent, Chattogram from 37 to 68 percent, Rangpur from 41 to 49 percent, and Sylhet from 28 to 65 percent.

The overall bed occupancy curve has been showing an upward trend in the past several days in Sylhet, Rajshahi, Khulna, and Dhaka divisions while in other divisions, it is very high despite a bit of a downward trend.

The curves for ICU, HDU and HFNC beds, however, have been showing an upward trend in all divisions meanwhile.

As of yesterday noon, at least 16 Covid-dedicated hospitals were treating extra patients against their capacity, according to DGHS data.

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

Experts said this trend may continue till the end of this month.

Prof Ridwanur Rahman, an infectious disease specialist, told this newspaper Tuesday, "The situation is grimmer than what it was in April. If there was easy transportation, the remaining high care hospital beds would have been occupied already. As the lockdown has been eased ahead of the Eid, the situation will deteriorate further."

He suggested imposing curfew-like restrictions as the hospital bed occupancy has surpassed 70 percent. "Otherwise, the health care system will break down soon."

Dr Mushtaq Hussain, consultant of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), told The Daily Star on Sunday, "Despite the ongoing lockdown, the transmission has not decreased yet. So the pressure on the hospitals will also increase."

He feared that the transmission will intensify in the cities when people will travel to their home districts for Eid-ul-Azha, which will be celebrated on July 21.

While the government has announced there will be five Covid field hospitals in Dhaka city, Dr Mushtaq urged the government to set up community-level hospitals by engaging the communities. "It will reduce the pressure on the hospitals," he added.

Jubo League man

FROM PAGE 1

midnight on Tuesday after receiving information that a group had gathered there.

He was pushed to the ground and prime accused Arindam stabbed the officer in the head and someone else hit his left leg with an iron rod, the case statement said.

The attackers fled after a few locals rushed to the spot hearing the sub-inspector's screams. The locals then rescued the SI and admitted him to the upazila health complex, according to the case statement.

Shah Ali filed the case later that day with Shalla Police Station accusing Arindam Chowdhury Apu, Bishwajit Roy, Polish Sarkar Paltu, Ratan Roy, Chandan Roy and three or four unnamed persons.

Md Nur Alam, officer-in-charge (OC) of the station, said, "We've arrested two, including the prime accused, in connection with the attack. We're investigating the matter."

The OC said that SI Shah Ali was still at hospital as of yesterday.

Meanwhile, Arindam's brother, lawyer Amitabh Chowdhury Rahul, claimed that the arrest was a vindictive act of the sub-inspector centring a communal incident.

Maulana Mamunul Haque, who was the joint general secretary of the Hefajat committee dissolved in May, went to a resort in Narayanganj on April 3 with someone he claimed to be his second wife.

An audio recording of a conversation with the woman was leaked on Ekattor TV the following day, and Arindam shared the audio on his Facebook account, Amitabh said.

In the ensuing days, locals had threatened attacks on their village and on Arindam unless he publicly apologised for sharing the recording, Amitabh said.

On April 10, Amitabh filed a general diary (GD) with the Shalla Police Station, mentioning the names of 13 people who had issued the threats.

These threats came within a month of the communal attack in Noagaon of the same upazila on March 17, over a Facebook post criticising Hefajat.

Talking to The Daily Star on Tuesday, Amitabh said, "After we filed the GD, the police put pressure on my brother instead of taking action against the intimidators. SI Shah Ali told my brother that it was not right to share such a post and that he should have thought about the arrest of Jhumon Das Apon in Noagaon."

"SI Shah Ali then spoke of deleting the post and removing the name of Hefajat-e-Islam and issues related to communal attacks the GD."

According to Amitabh, his family then lodged a complaint with the office of Sunamganj Superintendent of Police (SP) Mizanur Rahman about the pressure by Shah Ali.

The circle additional superintendent of police (ASP) investigated the matter, Amitabh said, adding that the family came to know that Shah Ali was served a show-cause notice.

"Shah Ali was furious with my brother when we lodged the complaint with the SP ... we have reasons to believe that this is the main reason behind the arrest of my brother by framing the false charge of assaulting the sub-inspector," he added.

He also alleged that Arindam was tortured in police custody after his arrest.

"We will file a complaint in court after he is produced before it today."

Contacted, Sunamganj SP Mizanur Rahman said, "The general diary and the subsequent complaint against the SI [Shah Ali] was settled as we instructed the SI not to pressurise the plaintiff to change the general diary, and to investigate properly and send a report in this matter."

"The SI later investigated the matter and informed that the accused were staying outside the country. The matter remains in that place," the SP said. "Most of the time the plaintiff doesn't feel happy about the police's work."

"However, it cannot be said with certainty that he is now being charged in connection with the attack. The matter is subject to investigation and we will take it seriously," he said.

Regarding torture of Arindam in custody, the SP said, "If torture has taken place in police custody, it is definitely a serious crime. When the victim is produced in the court, he can complain to the magistrate about the torture. If the allegation turns out to be true, we will take legal action."

Methane caused Moghbazar

FROM PAGE 1

floor of the three-storey building, said the report submitted to the home ministry on July 13.

"When a huge amount of methane gas accumulates in a small room, a tiny spark, even an unnoticeable one, can cause such a blast," BFSCD Director (operations) Lt Col Zillur Rahman, the head of the probe committee, told The Daily Star.

At least 12 people were killed and 50 others injured in the explosion that rocked the Wireless Gate area in the city's Moghbazar around 7:30pm on June 27. The blast triggered partial collapse of the building and shattered the glass walls of dozens of nearby structures.

Zillur said that when the fire service team visited the spot on the day of the incident, it found gas pipelines in the building though Titas Gas denied giving any connections there.

Besides, the team found a sewage pit inside the building, he said.

Contacted, Ali Iqbal Md Nurullah, managing director of Titas Gas, declined to make any comment.

The probe body made a six-point recommendation to avert such

incidents in the future.

Those include replacing old pipelines of Titas and changing the layout of underground pipelines.

Before constructing a building, it must be ensured that there is no underground pipeline at the construction site. When city corporations carry out work on the drainage system in any area, they should do it carefully so that no incident of pipe leakage takes place, the committee recommended.

The gas supply authorities should periodically inspect the pipelines and connecting lines to check whether there is any leakage. It also has to be ensured that gas does not leak from sewerage lines and every room of a building has sufficient ventilation.

Meanwhile, another probe committee, formed by Petrobangla, is yet to submit its report.

Seeking anonymity, a member of the five-member body said they primarily suspected that it was a gas explosion and there was leakage in gas pipelines.

"Such type of explosion is not caused by an air conditioner or LPG cylinder."

Covid may now spread

FROM PAGE 1

Amid fears of a further rise in transmission following the reopening, health officials warned the new transmission will create pressure on hospitals already overburdened in the last few weeks.

"As transmission is rising, there is pressure on hospitals. If we cannot keep the hospitals from crowding, we will be in danger," Robed Amin said.

According to DGHS data, there are 18,188 beds in 139 Covid-19 dedicated hospitals across the country.

Of yesterday's deceased, 131 were men and 79 women. Among them, 197 died in hospitals and 13 at home.

The highest 69 of the deceased were from Dhaka division followed by 46 from Khulna.

'AVOID PUBLIC GATHERINGS'

The Cabinet Division yesterday asked people to avoid all sorts of public gatherings, wear masks and follow the health safety rules to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

The instructions came a day after the division, in a circular, said restrictions imposed to stem surges in coronavirus cases and deaths would be relaxed from today for the celebration of Eid-ul-Azha and ease of public movement and economic activities ahead of the festival.

A nationwide "strict lockdown", imposed on July 1, ended yesterday.

The Cabinet Division, in a letter, said although the restrictions have been relaxed, everyone must follow the health rules.

"During this period [July 15-July 22], visits to tourist spots, resorts,

community and entertainment centres, participation in all social gatherings, including wedding receptions, and birthday parties, and political gatherings should be avoided," said the letter.

On Tuesday, the government said a "strict lockdown" would be enforced for two weeks from 6:00am on July 23.

In an order, the Supreme Court yesterday asked civil and criminal courts and tribunals to hold all hearings, except recording of depositions, virtually between July 15 and July 22.

Health guidelines should be followed during filing of cases and holding hearings, reads the order, signed by SC Registrar General Ali Akbar.

Earlier, the Bangladesh Bank gave directives to banks to carry out their activities from 10:00am to 4:00pm daily before the start of the Eid vacation.

After the vacation, banks will once again operate for three and a half hours daily till August 5.

Meanwhile, State Minister for Shipping Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury yesterday called upon passengers to wear masks while travelling on launches.

He also directed the vessel owners and workers to keep launches clean.

"The BIWTA, launch workers and members of law enforcement agencies will take measures to make people follow the health guidelines," he said while visiting development works at Sadarghat Launch Terminal in the city.

Govt mulls allowing RMG units to stay open

FROM PAGE 1

western market for winter and Christmas. Of the total apparel items shipped from Bangladesh, 40 percent are exported during these two months.

Against the backdrop of the Covid-19 infection surge and the rising death toll, the government on July 13 imposed curbs on factory operations as part of containment measures.

After an emergency meeting yesterday, apex trade bodies of textile and garment manufacturers, and exporters, demanded the government keep factories open during the lockdown, citing that they would incur a big loss otherwise.

Munshi said he had been facing a lot of pressure from the business communities, especially export-oriented garment-makers, to let the factories stay open.

"I will have a meeting with the government high-ups and expert committee very soon to find ways to keep the factories running during the lockdown."

Suspension of production for lockdown and Eid holidays for nearly three weeks is a long time, and the period may be shortened after discussion with the government high-ups, he said,

adding, "We are also thinking about some alternatives now so that both lives and livelihoods are protected during the pandemic time."

For instance, the period of lockdown may be shortened for the garment sector as the infection rate is very low among the workers and because testing and medical facilities are available for them, the minister also said.

Usually, July and August are the most important months for shipping of next winter and Christmas sales and for booking work orders for next summer, he added.

"An opportunity has also been created for garment businesses, as a lot of work orders have been coming to Bangladesh even during the pandemic. We should grab this opportunity while catering to the work orders on time."

A senior official of the commerce ministry said the government is also considering allowing factories that process edible oil, sugar and essential commodities to run, in order to the keep supply chain of essentials and prices intact.

After the meeting, Faruque Hassan, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association,

said they will send a letter to the cabinet secretary to place their demands to keep factories running during lockdown.

"We will face a severe crisis if factories are closed down during the lockdown," said Hassan after almost a four-hour long meeting in this regard.

"We want the factories to run as the production is still going on during this time."

The BGMEA in a statement said it will also hold a meeting with the cabinet secretary, demanding the factories be allowed to run during lockdown. They will also send a letter to the FBCCI in favour of its demand.

"Many of us have already shipped our goods and assured our buyers of sending goods timely," said Mohammad Ali Khokon, president of Bangladesh Textile Mills Association.

If the factories cannot run, the garment suppliers will have to face the expensive air shipments, for which many will be affected, said Shahadat Hossain Sohel, chairman Bangladesh Terry Towel and Linen Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

Local garment suppliers have been sending goods at \$4.30 per kg from Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport

to London.

The rates will go even higher if international retailers and brands want to get their goods within set time, he said.

"No factory owner is capable of bearing the cost of expensive air fares during a pandemic, which had already badly affected the global supply chain."

Abdul Kader Khan, president of Bangladesh Garment Accessories and Manufacturers and Exporters Association, said if the garment factories are not kept open, the accessories business will also not be able to run during the pandemic, as the accessories are the backward linkage industry for the garment sector.

"We will not get the payment from the garment manufacturers if they cannot run in the peak season," Khan also said.

The meeting was held at the Gulshan office of BGMEA. It was attended by Md Jashim Uddin, president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, AKM Salim Osman, president of Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association, former presidents of BGMEA and leaders of terry towel and garment accessories sectors.