

BANGLADESH UPDATE



6,780
New cases in 24hrs



11,53,388
Total cases



19,046
Deaths



9,88,339
Recoveries



GLOBAL UPDATE



4,164,102
Deaths



194,261,998
Total cases

WORLD DROWNING PREVENTION DAY Drowning remains dominant reason of child deaths

Study finds no intervention taken by govt

NILIMA JAHAN

Contrary to popular belief, the most dominant cause children's deaths in Bangladesh is not malnutrition or diarrhoea.

It is drowning. There is hardly a day when the media does not have report of child drowning to death, while the actual number of fatalities is far greater than what is reported.

A recent report by Society for Media and Suitable Human-communication Techniques (SoMaSHTE), a media development and communication focused organisation, paints a grim picture.

At least 1,402 people died by drowning in 875 incidents from January 2020 to June 2021, said the report.

Of them, 83 percent were children, said the report that was prepared by analysing news published in different national and local media.

SoMaSHTE's report showed nearly 514 of them were children aged below four, while 448 were aged between 5-9 years.

Most of the incidents occurred between morning and afternoon in water-bodies near their homes. Some 1,222 drowning victims were unattended, it added.

According to the WHO, 43 percent of the total number of children's deaths in Bangladesh occurred due to drowning. Every day, at least 30 under-five children die from drowning.

Despite such a huge number of fatalities, there is no plan or

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A motorcyclist carrying two oxygen tanks approaches a police checkpoint near Jashimuddin intersection of Uttara in the capital yesterday. Such sights have been quite common on city streets recently as people try to deal with the Covid-19 wave.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

Covid rising

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percent, while Jamalpur rose from 21 percent to 31 percent.

Kishoreganj's positivity rate rose by three percentage points while Dhaka's positivity rate rose by two percentage points within these two weeks.

Dhaka's infection rate is 34 percent as of now.

"We have an apprehension that the transmission may start leaping a few days later as there were no restrictions during the Eid festivals," Dr Abu Zamil Faisal, member of the Technical Advisory Group of the health directorate, told The Daily Star yesterday.

"Since our hospitals already are overburdened. If the situation worsens, it would be tough to handle it," he added.

The district with the highest jump in the infection rate is Rangamati -- the district had a positivity rate of 37 percent, and last week it was a whopping 77 percent. Out of 81 people tested, 62 turned out to be positive in Rangamati.

The second highest rise was seen by Thakurgaon, with a 26 percentage point increase where the current positivity rate is 68 percent.

The district with the sharpest decline is Kurigram, with the positivity rate dropping from 58 percent to 28 percent, shows the DGHS data.

Looking for way back

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where Brac Migration Programme found that among 417 migrants returned home amid the pandemic, 72 percent want to re-migrate.

Of them, 89 percent are from rural areas, said the survey report published in April that explores and analyses "socio-economic and psycho-social situation of returnee migrants after one year of their return home during the pandemic".

The report said 47.23 percent of the returnees don't have any income source.

Younger migrant workers were most eager to re-migrate for work, with some 84 percent of those wishing to re-migrate belonging to the 26-30 age group, the report said. Eighty percent of the respondents wishing to re-migrate are from Chattogram division.

While trying to reach 1,360 returnees for the survey, Brac found 207 of them had already re-migrated.

Shariful Hasan, head of Brac Migration Programme, said they found most of the respondents in the survey without an income source put re-migration as their "first choice".

Besides, he said, many who came home on vacation and were subsequently stuck here amid the pandemic or came home after losing their jobs, were contacted by their previous employers. So, they want to re-migrate.

TOP DRIVERS OF MIGRATION

Top drivers of migration from Bangladesh include absence of job opportunities, particularly in the formal sector; insufficient income; financial problems, and a lack of social services and limited social protection systems, said a report of International Organisation for Migration (IOM), published in August last year.

For the report, titled "Bangladesh: Survey on Drivers of Migration and Migrants' Profile", IOM interviewed 11,415 potential migrants -- either "regular" or "irregular" based on whether or not they had registered with the government -- in November-December 2019.

Most respondents, who intended to migrate by June 2020, were of working age and had attained some level of education, it said.

As many as 40 percent of the potential migrants were unemployed before deciding to migrate, and 90 percent reported no personal income or insufficient income, it added.

The report found if there were better job opportunities in Bangladesh, 99 percent of potential migrants would choose to stay in the country.

Bangladesh is the sixth largest origin country for international migrants in the world, with 7.8 million Bangladeshi migrants living abroad as of 2019, IOM said.

Over 2.2 million young adults join the labour force every year in Bangladesh, but the domestic labour market is unable to absorb all these job seekers, it said.

As per Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (Bmet) data, 1.95 lakh Bangladeshis took up new overseas employment this year, till May.

When people want to migrate abroad due to a lack of job opportunities or other alternatives, then it cannot be said migration is his or her choice, said Brac Migration Programme head Shariful.

"Migration has to be a choice," he said.

As lots of opportunities are opening up in Bangladesh at present, if these could be made "visible" to people intending to migrate, then they can have a choice, Shariful added.

Myanmar rebel group says received Covid jabs from China

AFP, Bangkok

China has supplied over 10,000 Covid vaccines to a Myanmar rebel group operating near its southern border, its spokesman said yesterday, as Beijing seeks to halt the influx of cases from the coup-ravaged country.

Myanmar has been in turmoil since the military took power in February, with a resurgent virus wave striking with many hospitals empty of pro-

democracy medical staff.

The Kachin Independence Army, which has waged a decades-long insurgency in Myanmar's far north, has received 10,000 vaccines from Yunnan authorities, Col Naw Bu, a spokesperson for KIA told AFP.

"KIA asked help from China, and China gave us help for vaccines," he said, without specifying which shot the group had been given or when the first batch had arrived.

Deadline missed

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The matter comes to the fore at a time when time and cost escalation of development projects have become a major concern, with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressing discontent over the delays on several occasions.

Every year, the government is allocating huge sums for the projects. For instance, even amid the pandemic, the government has allocated a 14 percent higher amount for the annual development programme this fiscal year: Tk 225,324 crore.

But the rate of the projects' progress seems diametrically different from the rate at which the allocations are being raised every year.

The absence of proper feasibility studies and technical designs, delay in land acquisition and managing funds, lack of institutional capacity to deal with so many projects, lengthy tendering process, irregularities and corruption are often blamed by experts for time and cost overrun.

Adding to the laundry list of factors causing delays is the global coronavirus pandemic.

The issue of tardiness in applying for extension was taken up at the monthly meeting of the IMED on July 12, where it was decided that a list would be made of the projects whose extension application did not arrive on time.

A letter will be sent to the respective

ministries drawing attention to the matter, shows the meeting minutes. The division has already sent a letter to a ministry.

The Daily Star spoke with a host of officials to find the reasons for the delay in sending in the extension proposals.

They cited a dearth of sincerity and urgency on the project authorities' part as well as a deficiency in competency for the delay. The global coronavirus pandemic was another factor that held up the applications.

The Roads and Highways Department (RHD) and the Bangladesh Railways accounted for the lion's share of time extension proposals last year: about 100.

RHD Chief Engineer Abdus Sabur said they have sought time extension for about 80 projects for a host of reasons, including a lack of funding for some and delays in land acquisition.

Asked about the delay in submitting the time extension proposals, he said there is a long process before the proposal is submitted to the IMED.

The project authority first submits the proposal to the agency concerned, and the agency, after necessary scrutiny, sends the proposal to the ministry concerned, which, after the necessary scrutiny, forwards it to the planning commission.

"So, this lengthy process is causing delay," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

Dhaka streets largely empty

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Amid rising cases of Covid-19, the government announced the "strict lockdown" from Friday after an eight-day break for the Eid. The lockdown bans operations of trains, domestic flights, river traffic, and personal vehicles. There is no restriction on freight services. The stricter lockdown will end at midnight on August 5.

In the capital, police, Rab, Border Guard Bangladesh and army personnel were deployed to enforce the lockdown at different checkpoints, but the rain interrupted checking at some points.

Plying of rickshaws was mostly allowed yesterday, but police strictly checked other vehicles. Police in Dhaka detained 383 individuals for being outdoors without valid reasons. Mobile courts fined 137 individuals and shops Tk 95,230 while DMP's traffic division fined 441 motorists Tk 10.83 lakh.

Rab conducted 180 patrols and set up 186 checkpoints across the country. Twenty-seven mobile courts accompanied by Rab fined 212 people Tk 1.91 lakh, said a press release.

Post and Telecommunication Minister Mustafa Jabbar yesterday in a Facebook post said users of nearly 1.11 crore mobile phones went out of Dhaka between July 15-23. Of them, over 17 lakh SIM subscribers had returned as of Friday.

Meanwhile, hundreds of people, including women, children and the elderly, were seen walking long distances with their bags on the streets of the capital yesterday.

In Gabtoli, police stopped ambulances, pickup trucks and cars carrying travellers.

Sanwar Hossain, a pharmaceutical company employee, returned to Dhaka from Sirajganj as a paying pillion rider. It cost him Tk 2,000. He was stopped by police in Amin Bazar and had to walk the rest of the way

Officers in the Amin Bazar area said some people were trying to enter the city claiming that they needed to go to medical facilities, but most of them had old and invalid documents.

Meanwhile, hundreds of people, on motorcycles, cars and microbuses travelled across the Padma on ferries between Daulatdia and Paturia and Bangla Bazar and Shimulia terminals.

Officials said the travelers were allowed to board the ferries on humanitarian grounds.

Out of 19 ferries, only six were operating on Bangla Bazar-Shimulia route, reports our Munshiganj correspondent.

Physical distancing could not be maintained on the crowded ferries. After crossing the river, many people were forced to walk long distances as there were no vehicles.

"I have to return to the capital to save my job. The management wants us at the workplace," said Arif Hossain, who works for a company. He was travelling via the Bangla Bazar-Shimulia route.

At Paturia ferry terminal between 8:30am and 10:30am, our Manikganj correspondent found that most vehicles, except buses, were being allowed to board the ferries.

Md Zillur Rahman, deputy managing director at BIWTC's regional office in Aricha, said only the vehicles providing emergency services were allowed to cross the Padma. But some people on foot and cars were also allowed on humanitarian grounds, he added.

In Gazipur, those travelling towards Dhaka without a proper reason were stopped and sent back. But people were seen hanging around in the neighbourhoods, reports our Gazipur correspondent.

A mobile court in the city fined Anwar Group's "A1 Polymer Limited" Tk 70,000 in the morning for keeping a factory open.

Built to crumble

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homes were built on low-lying wetland, filled with sand and alluvial silt, the only low-value land available.

But sources in the engineering unit of the Public Works Department (PWD) say that soil compaction was not done, meaning the homes were built on shifting soil.

But soil compaction was made mandatory in clear written instructions -- given by the PMO and available on the project website.

In Shariatpur's Goshairhaat, a third of the houses under the Ashrayan-2 project ended up with cracks within six months of the handover.

Tahmina Akhter, Shariatpur's project implementation officer, confirmed to our correspondent that the homes were built on land that was low-lying and poorly filled in.

"When it rained, the soil shifted. The Jayanti river flows behind the site and a canal in the front. Every time the tide rises, the land gets flooded. When the tide goes out, it depresses the land."

Similarly, a third of the houses built in Bogura's Sherpur developed cracks and partially collapsed during the monsoon.

Moynul Islam, Sherpur upazila nirbahi officer, told The Daily Star that they had filled up low-lying land with soil during the construction.

"Following the recent rainfall, the soil started subsiding into the canal. As a result, seven toilets and some walls of the houses have collapsed."

According to eminent architect Iqbal Habib, Bangladesh has five types of soil, and homes need to be built keeping the soil in mind.

"The land [on which Ashrayan homes were constructed] is khas land, which is the worst land in the area. Any structure on that land will have to be tailored for that. In this project, the construction is generic for every single upazila," he said.

But why was the terrain not prepared before the construction of the houses?

That's where the budget comes in -- almost all of the projects had a budget shortfall.

The money allocated for the project was based on the PWD's 2018 price index, said PWD engineers.

PWD engineers point out that the design specifications, released in February this year, show the budget allocated Tk 464 per square metre for procuring, carrying, and fitting corrugated tin sheets of 0.36mm thickness.

According to the market price, the procurement cost of the tin would be Tk 600 per square metre.

Iqbal Habib said he had seen the budget and found it to be grossly short of the actual amount needed.

"Incidentally, I have seen the design of these houses. The components cannot be rationally done for less than Tk 3.4 lakh," he said. The budget for each house, in comparison, was a maximum of Tk 1.9 lakh.

In Shariatpur, that meant implementers had to pay out of pocket to prepare the terrain.

"We had to fill up the site using our own resources because it was getting difficult to finish the project using the money that was allocated for it," said Tahmina.

"But since we had a government order, we had to carry it out."

The UNOs were given Tk 1.71 lakh for each house in the first phase and Tk 1.9 lakh for each constructed in the second phase -- both phases covering all 64 districts.

Failing to prepare the terrain led to a disaster in Jamalpur's Sharishabari where all 21 of the houses built had to be evacuated during the monsoon, when the site filled up with calf-high water. The residents had moved in only in May.

Sharishabari Upazila Parishad Chairman Giasuddin Pathan said, "Before selecting the site, the project implementing body should have considered that the local rivers overflow during deluges."

The budget shortfall also led to shoddy construction -- instead of building the houses on a concrete foundation, the homes stand on brick.

Our Barisal correspondent reports a budget shortfall led to the houses at the project in Mehendiganj being built with brick foundations instead of concrete.

Fourteen homes broke down as a result, while in Bhola's Lalmohon 12

homes have partially collapsed.

Mehendiganj gets inundated every fortnight and the coastal land the homes were built on gave way during the rains -- with no concrete to stand on, the brick walls collapsed.

Each Ashrayan-2 house was allocated only Tk 1.7 lakh whereas the cost of erecting a house in that area is around Tk 2.5 lakh, reports our correspondent.

In Barguna's Amtali, Abul Kalam Mal's new home developed cracks in 12 places within three months of construction. The pillar in front of the house collapsed, resulting in evacuation.

At least 100 of the 450 homes allocated to the poor in Amtali developed structural problems because the homes were built without lintels -- the horizontal beams constructed of iron rods that support a house.

Iron rods were too expensive for the constructors, the construction workers told our correspondent.

The construction workers said they had told Amtali's UNO Md Asaduzzaman that the homes without lintel would collapse. But that they were asked to carry on the construction regardless.

UNO Md Asaduzzaman was made OSD (officer on special duty) by the Ministry of Public Administration on July 5, after the district magistrate Md Habibur Rahman submitted a probe report concerning his activities with regards to the Ashrayan-2 project in his area.

So far, five admin cadre officials have been made OSD -- including the UNO of Kazipur of Sirajganj, Shaiful Islam; former UNO of Sherpur of Bogura, Md Liakat Ali Sheikh; former UNO of Munshiganj Sadar, Rubayet Hayat; and Munshiganj Sadar assistant commissioner (land) Sheikh Mejbah-ul-Saberin -- all in connection with the project.

At Munshiganj's Tongbari upazila and at Brahmanbaria's Nabinagar, implementation officers skimmed on the floors of the houses because of the budget shortfall.

Currently, the floors of all eight houses in Munshiganj's Nayashankar village are having to be recast -- these were inlaid with a one-inch layer of bricks, where it was supposed to be three inches thick.

Md Mofiz Dewan, supervisor of the construction workers engaged with the repairs, said the previous construction workers had done a hack job.

"The amount of cement in the casting is also very less, which is risky for the house. So, the floors are being recast."

Since the entire budget of Tk 1.9 lakh per house was used up during construction, the local union parishad chairperson paid for the repairs out of pocket.

Asked about the budget shortfall, Ashrayan-2 Deputy Project Director Md Jahedur Rahman said, "You are asking the implementer about the budget. You should ask those who decided the technical specifications."

The guidelines for the Ashrayan-2 first phase was only circulated in October last year. However, the handover of the nearly 70,000 houses took place in January this year, leaving little time for implementation.

PWD engineers say another major reason why the homes were damaged or destroyed within months of being constructed, is the huge pressure to get the project completed -- meaning the cement and brickwork did not get adequate time to get cured.

The brickwork, plaster, and the paint job too were all done simultaneously, instead of leaving time for each layer to cure.

As a result, many of the 101 houses built in Dinajpur's Phulbari upazila have cracks in the wall, floors, and pillars. The homes built on khas land in Basudebpur village were completed in March.

The careless construction and lack of knowledge of the local terrain at multiple sites also points to another major flaw in the plan -- the absolute absence of engineers anywhere.

The project was entirely implemented by UNOs and project implementation officers, said PWD sources.

"The government got the administrative wing to carry it out and no engineering evaluation was done," said Iqbal Habib.

In Pabna's Santhia upazila, around a third of the newly constructed houses are

having to be rebuilt because the heights of the houses are barely seven feet. The height should be 8.5 feet, according to the project's design specifications.

A total of 372 houses were built under the programme in Santhia and more than 100 of them suffer from this problem.

"The construction had to be completed quickly and we were unable to monitor all the sites properly," said Abdullah Al Jaber, project implementation officer.

At Barguna's Amtali, UNO Asaduzzaman had kept an upazila engineer in the project implementation committee but the engineer did not have a single day of work.

The engineer, Abdullah Al Mamun, told our correspondent, "I don't know anything about the construction of the houses. On occasion, the UNO sent people for my signature saying there is a meeting, and I signed on blank sheets."

The Daily Star attempted to contact Ashrayan-2 Project Director Mahub Hossain over phone several times, but failed to reach him.

However, he had briefed local journalists in Bogura's Sherpur following a visit on July 10, and said they would make repairs immediately, where necessary.

The Daily Star asked his deputy Jahedur where the budget for these will be coming from. "We have some budget allocation to build guide walls [used to reinforce the foundation]. Other sorts of repairs depend on the local government and they would know better," he replied.

But Iqbal Habib said, "I do not endorse the repairs unless engineers are involved. These houses need to be certified structurally by engineers."

He added, "If any lives are lost from collapsed houses in the future, the government must be ready to take the liability."

The first Ashrayan project was implemented between 1997 and 2010 to provide housing for distressed people affected by climate change. The current Ashrayan Project-2 is being implemented from July 2010 to June 2022 to provide housing for the landless and homeless.

From 1997 to 2019, a total of 298,249 families were rehabilitated at a cost of Tk 38.4 billion, according to government data.

[Our correspondents in Gazipur, Shariatpur, Bogura, Barisal, Jamalpur, Patuakhali, Brahmanbaria, Manikganj, Munshiganj, Lalmonirhat, and Thakurgaon contributed to the report]

104 land in hospital

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the infection in a month ending yesterday morning, which indicates the fast-rising cases of the disease.

In June, 272 were infected with dengue, up from 43 in May.

Though most of the hospitalised patients have already been released, 422 are still undergoing treatment at different hospitals in Dhaka, and three outside the capital, the DGHS data shows.

The recent spike in dengue cases has added to the burden of healthcare providers as the country continues to grapple with a wave of the Covid-19.

DGHS spokesman Nazmul Islam advised testing for dengue as well as coronavirus if anyone suffered from fever, reports UNB.

He said medicine should be taken only on the advice of a registered doctor. If necessary, one may contact the hotline number of the Directorate General of Health Services.

The DGHS reported 1,193 dengue cases and three dengue-related deaths last year. It marked a dramatic drop from the previous year, which was the worst year on record for dengue in the country.

Official figures show 101,354 dengue cases and 179 deaths were recorded in Bangladesh in 2019.

Dengue fever was first reported in the country in 2000 when 93 people died of the disease. In the following years, the country learned to deal with the disease much better.

Fatalities almost fell to zero at one stage, before spiking again in 2018, leading to the horrific crisis the following year.