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Your Right to Know

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"Factory workers are crowding the roads because they know if they don't join in time, they will either be sacked or face a salary cut."

PRESIDENT OF BANGLADESH GARMENT SRAMIK SANGHATI TASLIMA AKHTER



"Iran is not just an Israeli problem, but an exporter of terrorism, destruction and instability that are hurting us all."

ISRAELI FOREIGN MINISTER YAIR LAPID PUSHES FOR UN ACTION



"Delta is a warning: it's a warning that the virus is evolving but it is also a call to action that we need to move now before more dangerous variants emerge."

WHO'S EMERGENCIES DIRECTOR MICHAEL RYAN

Workers walk miles on end

Tens of thousands rush back to city after last-minute announcement of factory opening

STAR REPORT

The sudden government decision to reopen export-oriented factories from this morning amid the lockdown left thousands of workers in the lurch.

In the absence of public transport, they suffered badly on their way back to their workplaces, mainly in the capital, Savar, Gazipur and Narayanganj, throughout yesterday. Many of them had gone to their village homes to spend the Eid.

On Friday, a government circular said export industries, including garment factories, will be out of the ongoing 14-day lockdown's purview from today. Caught off-guard by the announcement, the workers had no other choice but to take the rough ride from different parts of the country.

Meanwhile, a circular from the Press Information Department (PID) last night said public transport would be allowed to operate till noon today to facilitate the workers' return to work.

Since yesterday morning, hapless workers were seen riding rickshaw vans, trawlers, goods-laden pickup trucks and even walking on highways along with their family members to reach their workplaces. Many of them said they were going through

so much suffering only to save their jobs.

Defying the Covid health guidelines, they scrambled at different ferry ghats to travel across rivers, causing a complete chaos and exposing themselves to the risk of virus infection.

Some aggrieved workers in Rangpur blocked a road, protesting the government decision to reopen factories without allowing public transport.

Labour leaders, meanwhile, lambasted the decision.

"This is a whimsical and irresponsible decision by the government. The decision forced workers to rush to workplaces by any means in the absence of public transport. Workers are treated as guinea pigs. Neither the government nor the factory owners think of the workers' wellbeing," Shahidullah Chowdhury, president of Bangladesh Trade Union Centre, told The Daily Star yesterday.

The government decision to reopen the factories came apparently due to constant pressure from factory owners. It happened although health officials had recommended extending the lockdown beyond August 5 to stem surging Covid infections and deaths across the country.

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The inevitable scramble to the capital a day after the government announced reopening the export-oriented production units amid the lockdown. Despite the fear of law enforcers implementing the travel restrictions and with no public transport available, thousands of workers had to walk miles along the highways or pay unjustifiably high fares to the handful of vehicles that carried them. The photo of the packed ferry was taken at Shimulia terminal in Munshiganj.

PHOTO: SAJJAD HOSSAIN

NEWS ANALYSIS

Barely ever on anyone's mind

WASIM BIN HABIB and TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

It seems the government can't stick to its decisions when it comes to tackling the pandemic.

Just four days ago, officials announced that the government would not reopen the export-oriented production units until the end of the lockdown on August 5, because of fear of a further surge in new cases of Covid-19 and deaths.

But in a span of 72 hours, the government backtracked on the decision and exempted the export-oriented factories from the so-called lockdown. Issuing a circular on Friday night, it allowed the reopening of the factories from this morning without mentioning how hundreds of thousands of garment factory workers will be able to join work in Dhaka amid ban on transport if they are in their hometowns.

And the result was inevitable: hundreds of workers, who had been in their village homes, thronged the bus and ferry terminals in hordes and scrambled back to Dhaka on a day's notice.

Neither the factory owners nor the government made an effort to assist the thousands of workers, who are mostly women, to travel to their workplaces.

The wage earners had to walk miles along the highways and board goods-laden trucks, pickups, cars, auto-rickshaws and whatever vehicle they could find to reach

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Covid cases up 58pc in one week

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Covid-19 cases went up by around 58 percent in the week ending yesterday compared to the numbers of the week prior to that, according to the Director General of Health Services (DGHS).

Covid deaths also rose by 19 percent during the period, the data shows.

A DGHS press release said 96,140 Covid patients were detected last week, whereas the number was 60,933 in the previous week.

Meanwhile, 218 coronavirus patients died across the country in 24 hours ending at 8:00am yesterday, taking the death toll of last week to 1,639, up from the previous week's 1,377 deaths.

In the same period, the number of recoveries

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COVID-19 VACCINE

A costly dilemma over pregnant women?

NILIMA JAHAN

The government is yet to decide whether to vaccinate pregnant women despite a WHO recommendation to that end and an alarming rise in the number of pregnant Covid-19 patients.

The death toll too is higher among pregnant and lactating women compared to other patients.

According to two major hospitals -- Dhaka Medical College and Hospital and Mugda Medical College Hospital -- where most pregnant women are taking treatment in the capital, the infection rate in the Covid-19 gynaecology units had reached their peaks towards the end of last month.

The number of pregnant Covid-19 patients in ICUs has also increased.

On July 26, the number of pregnant Covid positive patients in Mugda Medical was 45, while the day before, the DMCH had 50 such patients (30 confirmed, 20 suspected).

Dr Robed Amin, spokesperson for the Directorate General of Health Services, said, "Since we have not received any

recommendation from the National Technical Advisory Committee about vaccinating pregnant women, we are yet to take a decision."

He also said there's no specific statistics that pregnant women are dying more due to the delta variant and there's still no evidence the vaccine will not do any harm to them or the foetuses.

Dr Mohammad Shahidullah, chairman of the National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) on Covid-19, said the NTAC met last week regarding the issue and concluded that the pregnant and lactating mothers should have been vaccinated, as per the WHO interim.

"However, at the same time, we are waiting for the decision of the National Immunisation Technical Advisory Group [NITAG] and asked for its opinion, since it is the right body regarding vaccination decisions, and as far as I know, they're also positive regarding this issue... So, we are hoping that the government can shortly include the pregnant and lactating mothers in the Shurokha app."

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REGISTRATION FOR VACCINE

Passport, birth certificate to be allowed

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government will accept two more documents -- birth certificate and passport -- of the people alongside the National Identity (NID) card for Covid-19 vaccination registration, health officials said.

Health Minister Zahid Maleque will announce details on this on August 6, a day before the launch of the inoculation campaign at the union level.

This will ease the registration of those who have not been able to take vaccines yet as the NID card has so far been used as the only identification document for vaccination registration.

On Tuesday, the government had decided that anyone eligible for Covid vaccine will get the shot after producing his/her NID card at the vaccination centres.

Speaking to The Daily Star yesterday, DGHS Director General Prof ABM Khurshid Alam said, "We are thinking of alternatives to the NID card to give vaccines. The

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APPAREL TRADE

Vietnam overtakes Bangladesh

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Vietnam raced past Bangladesh to be the second-largest apparel exporter globally in 2020 as the Southeast Asian country managed to keep the coronavirus pandemic in control and allowed factories to operate.

Bangladesh's apparel shipment declined by 18 percent year-on-year to \$28 billion last year as the pandemic forced it to shut garment factories for almost a month, according to a report of the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Garment exports from Vietnam also dropped in 2020. It declined by 6 percent to \$29 billion, said the World Trade Statistical Review 2021 released on Friday.

As a result, Vietnam moved to the second spot after China, pushing Bangladesh to the third. China, which also

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Ainal Haq tries to give a few drops of water to his 60-year-old wife Jahanara Begum, a Covid patient with severe breathing difficulties, inside the ambulance that brought them from Munshiganj to Dhaka Medical College Hospital yesterday. The woman died a few moments later inside the ambulance.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

DIAMMONIUM PHOSPHATE FERTILISER Production halted, shortage feared

MOHAMMAD SUMAN, Ctg

Domestic production of diammonium phosphate, a widely used agricultural fertiliser, remains suspended since July 1, raising concerns over meeting its enormous domestic demand.

This happened due to a lack of coordination between the state-owned manufacturing company and the industries ministry over import of its key raw materials.

DAP Fertiliser Company Limited (DAFCL) is supposed to supply around 1.5 lakh tonnes of the fertiliser to the agriculture ministry to distribute among farmers at a subsidised price this fiscal year.

But with the purchase proposal of raw materials until very recently awaiting ministry approval, the suspension might hamper agricultural production and even require imports.

The proposal finally received approval the day offices reopened after Eid-ul-Azha, celebrated on July 21, nearly two months after it had been sent to the ministry.

"Once the purchase proposal is approved, it takes at least two months to import the raw materials and for them to reach the factory," Abdur Rahman Badshah, general manager (operations) of the DAFCL.

This would mean production may not resume till October, halted for three whole months, he added.

Based in Chattogram, DAFCL is the lone producer of the fertiliser in the country. With its high nutrient content, this fertiliser acts as a substitute for both urea and triple superphosphate.

DAFCL officials said production has been halted since July 1 due to the shortage of phosphoric acid, the main raw material for making the fertiliser.

"The proposal seeking approval to import three lots of raw materials through the two lowest bidders was sent to

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