

BANGLADESH UPDATE

9,369
New cases in 24hrs

12,49,484
Total cases

20,685
Deaths

10,78,212
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

4,229,066
Deaths

198,255,899
Total cases

COVID-19 SHOTS

Over 7.8 lakh AstraZeneca jabs arrive from Japan

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The country received 7.81 lakh doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine from Japan under the Covax facility yesterday.

Health Minister Zahid Maleque said officials will resume administering the AstraZeneca second dose shots in a day or two, reports UNB.

"Those who failed to take the second dose after getting the first one will be able to get it now," he told reporters at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport.

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen and Zahid Maleque received the shipment at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport around 3:15pm.

Ambassador of Japan to Bangladesh Ito Naoki and Senior Secretary of Health Service Division Lokman Hossain Miah were also present at the airport.

With yesterday's arrival, Bangladesh has received a total of 10.26 lakh doses of the vaccine from Japan. The country has committed to

supplying 30 lakh AstraZeneca doses to Bangladesh.

AK Abdul Momen thanked Japan for the AstraZeneca doses, which is of particular importance as some 15 lakh people are waiting for their second shot of this vaccine.

He told reporters that the remaining 20 lakh AstraZeneca doses will be arriving from Japan soon. Bangladesh has true friendship with Japan, he added.

Bangladesh has been calling for declaration of Covid-19 vaccines as a public good and transfer of technology for vaccine production, he said, adding that Japan will support Bangladesh in its demand.

The pandemic is a global problem, and as long as some people in some countries are left vulnerable, the world cannot be safe, he said.

Momen said Japanese firms work efficiently and deliver ahead of schedule. He also thanked Japan for recruiting Bangladeshi professionals and providing them with training.



Runaway infection rate, rising number of deaths from Covid-19, and the restrictions of lockdown have not been able to stop crowding at the fish market at Notun Bazar in Fishery Ghat, Chattogram city, yesterday.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Workers walk miles on end

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Garment owners had been persuading the government to reopen the factories from August 1, after a seven-day Eid vacation.

On July 27, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan told reporters that the ongoing lockdown would continue till August 5, considering the Covid-19 situation. "Although the factory owners pleaded for the reopening, we can't accept their request."

But two days after this statement, the cabinet division said that all export-oriented industries and factories would be out of the restriction's purview from August 1. The decision was made taking the "overall situation" in mind, it said.

The circular was issued a few hours after the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) recommended extending the lockdown. On Friday, DGHS Director General Prof ABM Khurshid Alam told reporters that if the government reopened everything, infections would definitely rise. He also said, "If the infections increase, we will not be able to accommodate patients at the hospitals."

The country has been going through a massive health crisis due to a spike in Covid infections and deaths over the last one month, caused by the Delta variant of the coronavirus.

Earlier yesterday, an official of Bangladesh Railway said they were yet to be communicated about any formal decision on resuming train operations.

UNTOLD SUFFERINGS

In Mymensingh, thousands of garment workers were seen desperately trying to return to their workplaces, mainly in Dhaka and Gazipur.

Anamul Haque from Shymganj in Netrakona was seen walking along with his wife and two children in Shambhugan Bazar of Mymensingh. They had managed to reach Shambhugan Bazar in a vehicle, which was not allowed to go any further.

"I was informed around 9:30pm on Friday that I have to join my factory in Muna on Sunday. It is very hard for us to make such journeys in such a short notice," he said.

In Pabna, people left the town on trucks. Due to the lockdown, people from different areas of northern districts reached Hatikumul, Kodda, Saydabad and different points on the Bangabandhu Bridge, thinking they would be able to reach their destination somehow from there.

Most of the workers were seen travelling on trucks flouting health safety rule.

In Tangail, crowds of Dhaka-bound passengers were seen at various points on the highways in different areas, including Hatikumul intersection and Kadda intersection in Sirajganj on the western end of Bangabandhu Bridge and Elenga in Tangail at the eastern end of the bridge.

Nasima Akter and Raihan Mia, a couple working at a garment in Ashulia area of Savar, said they knew the factories would reopen once the lockdown was over. But suddenly they had to leave in a hurry. They suffered immensely on the road.

In Rangpur, several hundred people blocked the Rangpur-Dhaka highway for at least four hours from 11:00am yesterday in protest against not getting vehicles to reach their destinations in Dhaka.

"If we fail to reach our factories before the reopening on Sunday, many of us will lose their jobs," said Md Moudud Hossain, a garment factory worker.

In Gazipur, people were seen

walking and riding on trucks and auto-rickshaws to reach their workstations, flouting health safety rules.

People were gathering in different points on the highway to get transport. Whenever they saw a truck, people raced to cling on to the vehicle.

Rafiqul Islam, who was waiting for transport, told The Daily Star that he had already spent Tk 2,090 to reach Jaina Bazar of Sreepur from Haluaghat of Mymensingh.

Sadek Hossain, another worker from Mymensingh, said that he had started the journey for his factory in Tongi around 4:00am. "But it took seven hours to reach Chandana intersection and I have already spent Tk 2,500," he said.

In Munshiganj, a total of 10 ferries operated from Shimulia ghat to carry only passengers since yesterday morning.

Shafiqul Islam, deputy general manager at Shimulia Ghat, said due to pressure of the passengers, they were operating 10 ferries and if needed more ferries would be operated.

In Barishal, the situation was like the other parts of the country as the passenger buses are not operating. Workers were seen travelling on motorcycles, three-wheelers and goods-laden vehicles to reach their workplaces.

WHAT LABOUR LEADERS SAY

The decision to reopen the factories should have been announced well in advance to avoid a mad rush of workers to rejoin their workplaces, said Nazma Akter, president of Sammito Garment Sramik Federation.

In the absence of public transport, they went through great tribulation, she said.

Towhidur Rahman, president of the Bangladesh Apparels Workers Federation, echoed the same.

The government decision totally disregarded the workers, 70 percent of whom left for their village homes given the 14-day lockdown, said Shahidullah Chowdhury, coordinator of Sramik Karmachari Oikkyia Parishad.

"Now, they have to return, which increases the risk of the spread of coronavirus among workers," he said, adding that the government and garment factory owners must take the responsibility in case they get Covid-19.

Asked, Faruque Hassan, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, (BGMEA), said, "We will start operations with the workers who are already in the factories or are staying at their residences near the factories."

He made the comment while instructing to resume production from today with the available workforce.

At most, 50 percent of the workers went to their village homes before the Eid vacation, he claimed.

Besides, many workers hail from places like Maona, Bhaluka, Kashimpur, Narsingdi, Narayanganj, Manikganj and Gazipur areas, where nearly 40 percent of the garment factories are located.

It is the workers who hail from the northern districts, Tangail and Mymensingh who will have to face difficulty in returning to their workstations for the lack of public transport, said Hassan, also the managing director of Giant Group.

Those workers can join when public transport service resumes, he said, adding that nobody will lose their jobs for failing to report to duty today, he said.

[Our correspondents in the districts contributed to this report]

A costly dilemma over pregnant women?

FROM PAGE 1

Understanding the urgency of the situation, the Obstetrical and Gynaecological Society of Bangladesh (OGSB) formed a committee on July 20 for recommendations on Covid-19 vaccination for pregnant and lactating women.

The committee sent a letter to the health ministry on July 24, requesting the government to include pregnant and lactating mothers in the vaccination programme.

Citing examples of the USA and Canada, OGSB President Ferdousi Begum said, "If we think about Bangladesh's situation, do the benefits not outweigh the risks? A good number of mothers have already died and what is more important is that they are spreading the virus, like everyone [with the infection]."

She also said although they do not have any comprehensive database on the delta variant's impact on the increase in infection rates among pregnant women, the forum's observation is that the number is increasing.

"We are assuming it [the increase in infection rate] is because of the delta variant."

On Thursday, rights organisation Law and Life Foundation served a legal notice on the government, requesting it to take necessary steps in 24 hours to provide Covid-19 vaccine to expecting mothers on priority basis in order to protect their health.

Citing information from the health ministry, the organisation said around 35 lakh women become pregnant per year, which means 35 lakh women carry existences of 35 lakh more people every year. "But thousands of expecting mothers and unborn children are dying due to Covid-19 infection."

The deaths of expecting mothers and their children can be reduced if they are vaccinated on a priority basis, the notice added.

Barely ever on anyone's mind

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the industrial hubs in Dhaka, Gazipur, and Narayanganj and save their jobs.

Not surprisingly, they had to pay two or three times the usual fare to the motorists who gave them a ride. Besides, the cross-country travelling en masse caused significant health risks for the workers and the people in general.

Complying with the health safety guidelines to curb the spread of coronavirus was a far cry onboard the ferries where finding the room to stand one's feet was a challenge.

This begs a few questions: does the government care about the people who toil day and night to keep the wheel of economy running?

Why didn't the authorities think about how the workers would travel in

absence of public transport? Couldn't the workers be given at least a few days' notice to get back to work?

What made the government high-ups change their decision? After the daylong sufferings, the authorities last evening decided to ease the restrictions on public transport from 12:00am today.

Hours before the cabinet division's circular on Friday, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) disclosed that it recommends extending the current countrywide lockdown.

Even the health experts and the government's National Technical Advisory Committee on Covid-19 were of the view that the restrictions should be in place for a couple of more days to break the chain of transmission.

But the government seemed to have

paid no heed to its experts. In fact, more than a dozen committees were formed by the government to tackle the spread of coronavirus since the first cases were detected in the country in March last year. But most of the committees' recommendations were ignored when it came to enforcing lockdown, especially the timing of it and the way it should be executed. For the last one and a half years, the people saw incoherence and lack of coordination among the government bodies.

Such an incoherence not only left the workers in untold sufferings but also heightened the risk of further spread of the deadly virus. We cannot afford to be so careless about those who are one of the main pillars of the country's economy.

As studies were underway, pregnant and lactating women were initially not included in the clinical trials of the vaccines.

Prof Dr Fahmida Khan, of Mudga Medical College's gynaecology unit, said since a woman's body undergoes many changes during pregnancy, it is common for the immune system to weaken during that time. This makes them vulnerable to infections like Covid-19.

She suggests that any woman, upon finding out she is pregnant, must stay indoors other than in times of emergencies.

"Most importantly, their family members must take necessary precaution while coming in contact with them and wear masks around them," she said adding that most pregnant mothers are staying home but are getting infected by family members who are having to go outside.

Dr Md Muniruzzaman Siddiqui, director of Mohammadpur Fertility Services and Training Centre and 100-Bed Mother and Child Health Hospital, discouraged pregnant women from even going to prenatal visits at the hospital, other than for emergencies like bleeding and/or pain.

He urged them to take teleconsultation services through hospital hotlines.

According to Md Nazmul Haque, director of DMCH, 14 pregnant women have died in DMCH between July 1 and July 25.

"It is very sad that so many pregnant women are being admitted with Covid-19 and then dying along with their babies. They also have to endure other pregnancy complications in the meantime... We are working to ensure better services for them."

WHO RECOMMENDATION In an interim in February, the WHO recommended vaccination for pregnant women when the benefits of

vaccination to the pregnant woman at high risk of exposure to Covid-19, and with comorbidities that place them in a high-risk group for severe Covid-19, outweigh the potential risks.

The interim recommendation mentioned that "pregnant women should be provided with information about the risks of Covid-19 in pregnancy, the likely benefits of vaccination in the local epidemiological context, and current limitations of the safety data in pregnant women. The WHO does not recommend pregnancy testing prior to vaccination or delaying pregnancy or terminating a pregnancy because of vaccination."

The recommendation was made since the available Covid-19 vaccines are not live virus vaccines, which are more likely to pose risks during pregnancy.

Besides, data from animal studies and post-introduction surveillance data have not shown harmful effects in pregnancy and the vaccine effectiveness was found likely to be comparable to non-pregnant women.

During an interview on June 24, WHO's Chief Scientist Dr Soumya Swaminathan said it's important that pregnant women in every country be explained the benefits versus the risks and be given the vaccine if they would like to take it.

The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention on June 29 also said that getting the vaccine can protect women from facing the adverse effects of the infection during pregnancy.

"If you have questions about getting vaccinated, a conversation with your healthcare provider might help, but is not required for vaccination," it mentioned.

After WHO's interim recommendations, countries like USA, Canada and the neighbouring India has already been offering Covid-19 vaccines to the pregnant mothers.

Malaysians stage anti-govt protest despite Covid curbs

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Hundreds of black-clad Malaysians yesterday staged an anti-government protest in defiance of a ban on public gatherings under coronavirus curbs, piling pressure on the embattled prime minister to resign.

The mostly young protesters, wearing masks and keeping a distance from one another, waved banners reading "failed government" as well as black flags.

It was the first sizeable demonstration in Malaysia for some time, as many had been reluctant to take to the streets due to virus curbs and for fear of getting infected.

But anger is growing at the government's handling of a virus outbreak -- which is escalating despite a lockdown -- and Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's attempts to keep his crisis-riven administration in power.

Vietnam overtakes

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registered a decline in export, shipped apparel worth \$142 billion in 2020.

Bangladesh's share in the global apparel trade declined to 6.3 percent last year from 6.8 percent in 2019.

Vietnam's share rose to 6.4 per cent from 6.2 percent. China also made gains.

Vietnam has been widely praised for its public health measures that quickly brought numbers under control.

When the virus first spread beyond China in early 2020, Vietnam acted fast and decisively, closing its borders to almost all travellers except returning citizens, according to the BBC.

Faruque Hassan, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), told The Daily Star that he is hopeful Bangladesh will soon regain the second position.

Garment factories in Bangladesh were largely closed in April last year. As a result, the country's overall export earnings plunged to a record low of \$0.52 billion that month. The apparel shipment, which accounts for about 85 percent of the national exports, was \$0.37 billion.

Bangladesh lost \$6 billion in exports in 2020 because of the closure of factories during the shutdown, said BGMEA Vice-president Md Shahidullah Azim.

Another factor that contributed to Vietnam's success is the country's non-cotton garment items for which it received premium prices from international buyers.

On the other hand, Bangladesh is strong in producing cotton items and receives lower prices. Of the total garment export from the country, 74 percent is cotton-made.

Hassan said, "We have launched our innovation centre to overcome our limitations in research on markets and product development so that we can perform better in the global garment trade."

Bangladesh has also started investing in non-cotton items to grab more market share and get premium prices.

AK Azad, managing director of Ha-Meem Group, one of the biggest apparel exporters of Bangladesh, said the gain made by Vietnam is temporary.

"As major infrastructures are being readied," he said, citing the ongoing construction of the economic zones.

Covid cases up

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has also risen by around 38 percent. Last week, 89,873 Covid-19 patients recovered. The number was 65,176 the previous week.

In 24 hours ending at 8:00am yesterday, 9,369 people tested positive for Covid after 30,980 samples were tested. The positivity rate was 30.24 percent, said the DGHS press release.

The positivity rate is an important parameter to measure the level of virus transmission.

According to the World Health Organisation, the governments can go for reopening if the positivity rate remains stagnant below five percent continuously for at least two weeks.

After a spike in cases in November and December last year, the positivity rate started going down from January. Throughout February, the rate was below three percent, but it started rising in early March and remained around 30 percent for the last two weeks.

With the latest counts, the total number of deaths due to Covid-19 is 20,685 while the number of confirmed cases is 12,49,484.

Of those reported dead yesterday, 134 were males and 84 were females.

Of them, the highest division-wise deaths -- 67 -- were reported in Dhaka division followed by 55 in Chattogram. Among other divisions, 27 were in Khulna division, 22 in Rajshahi, 16 in Rangpur, 12 in Mymensingh, 10 in Barishal and nine in Sylhet.