

BANGLADESH UPDATE

8,465
New cases in 24hrs14,05,333
Total cases23,810
Deaths12,73,522
RecoveriesGLOBAL UPDATE
4,352,955
Deaths206,513,289
Total cases

STRONG CURRENT IN PADMA

500 vehicles stranded at Paturia ghat

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Manikganj

Around 500 vehicles, most of them goods-laden trucks, were waiting at the Paturia ferry terminal in Manikganj till yesterday evening to cross the Padma, as ferry movement was slowed down due to strong currents.

Vehicles have been queuing up for the last three days as the authorities concerned are allowing the vehicles carrying passengers and emergency goods to board ferries on a priority basis.

Although four ferries have been brought to the Paturia-Daulatdia route from the Shimulia-Banglabazar route to keep services smooth, the authorities were yet to normalise the situation.

Currently, 17 ferries are in operation on the Paturia-Daulatdia route and one is under repair, said Zillur Rahman, deputy general manager (Aricha regional office) of the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport

Corporation (BIWTC).

A ferry now takes 45 minutes instead of 30 to cross due to strong currents in the Padma, he said.

Moreover, the number of vehicles have increased on the route, as ferries are not allowed to carry heavy vehicles on the Shimulia-Banglabazar route, he said.

The authorities have banned the heavy vehicles on the Shimulia-Banglabazar route after ferries hit pillars of the Padma bridge four times in just a month.

"Mainly goods-laden trucks have to wait at the ferry terminals, as we are prioritising the passenger and emergency vehicles to cross," the official said.

The water level of the Jamuna at Aricha point in Shibhaloy upazila has been increasing over the last few days and so has that of the Padma, which is causing strong currents in the river, according to the Manikganj Water Development Board.

Disbursement remains slow

FROM PAGE 1

The government set a target of inoculating 80 percent of Bangladesh's population with two doses of vaccines in one and a half to two years.

To buy the vaccine shots and deliver the jabs to the people, it will need an estimated \$3.7 billion, a major portion of which will come from the loans from development partners.

"The price of the vaccine is fickle worldwide. According to our estimate last year, we would need a little over \$2 billion. But the scenario has changed this year," said another finance ministry official preferring to remain unnamed.

The official believes that the pace of disbursement would increase in the coming days as the government is purchasing vaccines from various sources.

"For example, we have to pay Sinopharm for the procurement of six crore doses soon," he said.

CURRENT STATUS OF VACCINES

Bangladesh has so far received 2.91 crore shots in total.

The government has purchased 1.5 crore doses of Sinopharm vaccines, of which it has so far received 70 lakh doses.

On Wednesday, the cabinet committee on purchase approved a proposal for procuring a further six crore doses of the Sinopharm shots. The doses are expected in November.

The country received more than 21 lakh doses of Sinopharm vaccine in

two consignments as gifts from China. Of the 21 lakh, 10 lakh shots arrived last night.

Besides, it received a consignment of 34 lakh doses of Sinopharm vaccine under the Covax facility, a global arrangement.

As far as the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine is concerned, the government has so far received 70 lakh out of 3 crore doses procured from Serum.

It received 33 lakh doses of the vaccines from India as gifts and 16.41 lakh doses under the Covax facility.

On the other hand, the government received 55 lakh doses of the Moderna and 1.06 lakh doses of Pfizer vaccines.

After starting in February, the country's mass vaccination programme came to a halt when Serum stopped delivering the doses in April. It resumed in the first week of July after the country got vaccines from various sources.

The country has so far inoculated 1.53 crore people, which is just over four percent of the population. And only 52.24 lakh of them got both the first and second shots.

The finance ministry officials said the government is going ahead with the plan of inoculating 15 crore shots by the end of this year.

"If everything goes as per the plan, we will get more vaccines. So, the pace of disbursement of funds will automatically go up," the official added.

Trudeau expected to call Canada snap elections Sunday

APP, Ottawa

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is expected to pull the plug on his minority Liberal government and call snap elections on Sunday despite a nationwide uptick in Covid infections that is worrying voters.

Trudeau is to visit the governor general to ask her to dissolve parliament and announce voting will be held on September 20, according to public broadcaster CBC and other local media, citing unnamed sources.

He and opposition leaders have been

crisscrossing the country in recent weeks making election-style announcements as talk of a possible fall ballot has heated up.

In power for six years, Trudeau was reelected in 2019 but lost his majority in his second term amid scandals.

Despite rolling out massive pandemic aid, passing a federal budget and other key legislation with opposition backing over the past year, he has lamented that parliament in recent months has become dysfunctional, with a "level of obstructionism and toxicity in the House that is of real concern."

Norwegian diplomat Geir Pedersen reiterated his call for an immediate end to the violence and urged all parties to uphold the principle of protecting civilians.

AFP, Geneva

The UN special envoy for Syria on Thursday voiced his growing concern at increased hostilities in the south of the country and warned of the alarming shortages faced by civilians.

"The game-changer is that you could distribute the [powder] vaccine extremely easily without the cold chain, and it can be administered without the need for healthcare providers," said a BBC report on July

26 quoting ISR founder, Ola Winquist, a professor of immunology at the Karolinska Institute, one of Sweden's leading medical universities.

In a press release on the ISR website, Ola Winquist, the CEO of ISR, said, "We are very pleased to be working with experts from Bangladesh to conduct a Phase I clinical study with our vaccine formulations designed for optimal immune response at the entry point of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the respiratory tract."

Prof Kabir told this newspaper that if they get permission for clinical trial, a local drug-maker which struck a deal with the ISR will supply the vaccine.

The ISR signed a MoU with UniMed UniHealth Pharmaceuticals Ltd on July 6 for manufacture and distribution of its Covid-19 vaccine in Bangladesh.

"The purpose of MoU is to agree on a long-term cooperation agreement with a licensing agreement that gives UniMed an exclusive right to manufacture and distribute ISR's vaccine against the SARS-CoV-2 virus in Bangladesh," said an ISR statement on its website.

UniMed will manufacture 100 million units per year with an aim to produce 300 million units or more annually within five years, it mentioned.

Prof Kabir said if everything goes smoothly and the BMRC gives quick approval, the phase-I trial will be completed by November. And analysing the data, the third phase trial can be started by December.

"We hope to produce vaccine here from January next year," said an optimistic Kabir.

INITIATION OF THE PROCESS

It all started when Bangladesh-born Swedish economist Shahjahan Sayeed, who is acquainted with Ola Winquist,

came to know about the invention of the dry-powder vaccine.

Shahjahan then communicated the matter to Arifur Rahman, a Bangladesh-born doctor living in Canada, to explore the possibility of a human trial of the vaccine in Bangladesh.

Arifur then asked four Bangladeshi US citizens -- cardiologists Prof Choudhury Hafiz Ahsan and Prof Masudul Hassan, nephrologist Prof Ziauddin Ahmed Sadek and former senior UN official Mahmud Ush Sams Choudhury to contact doctors in Bangladesh for initiating trial here.

Prof Abdullah and Prof Kabir then prepared a protocol for the trial with Arifur playing the lead role and coordinating the whole thing from Sweden.

Talking to this newspaper, Arifur said they came forward as Bangladesh is suffering badly due to Covid.

"Now everything is almost ready and we are expecting to get within 15 days a toxicology report on whether the vaccine has any adverse effects.

Once we get the report from a German organisation, we will send it to the CRO so that it can apply to the Bangladesh authorities for ethical permission for the trial.

"We hope the trial will be a success and Bangladesh will get the chance to become a leader in Covid vaccine production..."

Prof Masudul said, "If everything goes as planned, we will consider it a great service to the nation."

"Patriotism is the lone driving force behind our efforts. There is nothing else. We wanted to do something for the country in this moment of crisis.

Earlier, we had managed ventilators and vaccines from the USA and sent those to Bangladesh."

UN Syria envoy alarmed by hostilities

AFP, Geneva

The UN special envoy for Syria on Thursday voiced his growing concern at increased hostilities in the south of the country and warned of the alarming shortages faced by civilians.

"Thousands of civilians have been forced to flee Daraa al-Balad. Civilians are suffering with acute shortages of fuel, cooking gas, water, and bread. Medical assistance is in short supply to treat the injured.

"The situation is alarming."

At Thursday's virtual meeting of the International Syria Support Group's Humanitarian Task Force, Pedersen stressed that immediate, safe and unimpeded humanitarian access must be granted to all affected areas and communities, and that the near siege-like situation must end.

"There is the potential for increased confrontations and further deterioration unless there is an immediate calm and a political way forward," Pedersen's office said.

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Kandahar falls to Taliban

FROM PAGE 1 emerged in 1994 amid the chaos of civil war to sweep through most of the rest of the country over the next two years.

The defeats have fuelled concern that the US-backed government could fall to the insurgents within weeks as international forces complete their withdrawal after 20 years of war.

US intelligence assessments concluded this week that the Taliban could isolate Kabul within 30 days and take it over in 90.

"The situation has all the hallmarks of a humanitarian catastrophe," the UN World Food Programme's Thomson Phiri told a briefing, adding the agency was concerned about a "larger tide of hunger".

The fighting has also raised fears of a refugee crisis and a rollback of gains in human rights. Some 400,000 civilians have been forced from their homes since the beginning of the year, 250,000 of them since May, a UN official said.

Under the Taliban's 1996-2001 rule, women could not work, girls were not allowed to attend school and women had to cover their face and be accompanied by a male relative if they wanted to venture out of their homes. In early July, Taliban fighters ordered nine women to stop working in a bank.

Of Afghanistan's major cities, following the eight-day blitz by Taliban, the government still holds Mazar-i-Sharif in the north and Jalalabad, near the Pakistani border in the east, in addition to Kabul.

The first wave of the offensive was launched in early May after the United States and its allies all but withdrew their forces from Afghanistan, with

President Joe Biden determined to end two decades of war by September 11.

Biden insists he does not regret his decision, but the speed and ease of the Taliban's urban victories in recent days has been a surprise and forced new calculations.

Washington and London announced plans late Thursday to pull out their embassy staff and citizens from the capital.

"We are further reducing our civilian footprint in Kabul in light of the evolving security situation," US State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters, while noting the embassy would remain open.

"This is not abandonment. This is not an evacuation. This is not the wholesale withdrawal."

The Pentagon said 3,000 US troops would be deployed to Kabul within the next 24 to 48 hours, underscoring they would not be used to launch attacks against the Taliban.

Many embassies were asking staff to destroy or remove classified documents as part of evacuation plans, a Western official told Reuters.

Nato was also set to hold an urgent meeting later yesterday about the deteriorating situation, diplomatic and official sources told AFP.

After months of taking what were considered less strategically important rural areas, the Taliban since early June zeroed in on the cities.

The insurgents have taken over more than a dozen provincial capitals in the past week.

And in Herat yesterday, a day after its fall, the Taliban said they had captured the city's long-time strongman Ismail Khan, who helped lead the defence of

NORTHERN INDIA

2,000 people evacuated after landslide

AFP, Shimla

At least 2,000 people were evacuated yesterday after a massive landslide in India's ecologically fragile Himalayan north blocked a major river, officials said.

The people were evacuated from 13 villages in the Lahaul area of Himachal Pradesh state as a "preventative measure" in case of flash floods, a senior district official told AFP.

Ferry hits Padma

FROM PAGE 1

Chowdhury, state minister for shipping, to visit the Padma bridge yesterday.

Quader, while visiting the Mawa end of the bridge, told reporters that with this incident, this is the fourth time a ferry hit a pillar in one month.

"It will be a mistake if we take it lightly or treat it as an incapacity of the ferry master. We need to find out if there is any conspiracy behind it. I will request the Bangladesh Army [who is looking over the bridge's construction project] to look into the matter in depth."

He said they would sit together to discuss the frequent hits.

While visiting the Shimulia end of the bridge, Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury said there was indifference to abiding by instructions necessary to avoid hitting pillars.

The incidents are being investigated. Weakness and irresponsibility are also being examined. Action will be taken against those who acted irresponsibly."

The army, in a meeting with other stakeholders in Shariatpur's Jajira cantonment yesterday, said they decided to put rubber tyres around the pillars to stave off damages from future collisions.

Syed Md Tajul Islam, chairman of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation, who took part in the meeting, confirmed the decision to The Daily Star.