

BANGLADESH UPDATE 3,436 New cases in 24hrs 14,89,589 Total cases 25,926 Deaths 14,09,231 Recoveries GLOBAL UPDATE 4,505,008 Deaths 216,607,248 Total cases

Floods worsen in north, north-central

Major rivers continue to swell

STAR REPORT

Many areas of the country's northern and north-central districts have been facing inundation as adjoining rivers continue to swell. People in the areas have been suffering as their homesteads and croplands have been submerged. Many of them have left home and taken shelter on dykes, roads and other highlands for survival while river erosion is taking place in different districts. At least 14 rivers of the country were flowing above danger level yesterday morning, said a bulletin of the government's Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre (FFWC). The bulletin was released at 9:00am. "In next 24 hours, the flood situation in low-lying areas of Kurigram, Gaibandha, Jamalpur, Bogura, Tangail, Sirajganj, Pabna, Manikganj, Rajbari, Faridpur, Shariatpur and Chandpur districts may deteriorate," it said. Water levels of rivers in nine districts could rise further and exceed the danger level during the next couple of days, worsening the flood situation, a FFWC official told The Daily Star yesterday. In Kurigram, fresh areas are being flooded as two major rivers -- the Brahmaputra and Dharla -- were swelling. The Brahmaputra was flowing 20cm above the danger level at Chilmari point yesterday morning, while the Dharla was flowing 32cm above the danger level at the Dharla bridge point. Some 40,000 people of nine upazilas have been suffering due to inundation, according to district administration and WDB officials.

"My family and I, along with my cattle, have taken shelter on the roads. It is very difficult for us," said Azgar Ali Sheikh, 60, a resident of Kurigram Sadar upazila's Char Jatrapur area. In Lalmonirhat, floodwater has started receding in many areas. "We are working to prevent river erosion," said Mizanur Rahman, executive engineer of WDB. In Sirajganj, low-lying areas of Sadar, Kazipur, Chowhali, Shahzadpur and Belkuchi upazilas have been flooded. The Jamuna is flowing 25cm above the danger level in Sirajganj, said Md Nasir Uddin, sub-divisional engineer of the WDB. In Pabna, areas of Bera upazila have been flooded as the Jamuna has been swelling, while many areas of Pabna Sadar and Ishwardi upazilas are also waterlogged. "We have been waterlogged for around two weeks and our homes have been submerged. We are going through immense sufferings," said Josna Begum, oh Pabna Sadar upazila's Char Ghoshpur area. In Tangail, more low-lying areas of Sadar, Kalihati, Bhuanpur, Basail, Nagarpur, Delduar and Mirzapur upazilas have been flooded as the Jamuna and its' branch rivers continue to swell. The Jamuna was flowing over 26cm above the danger level in Tangail, said Sirajul Islam, WDB's executive engineer. Sirajul claimed that necessary measures would be taken to prevent river erosion. Road communications in these areas have also snapped due to waterlogging. [Our correspondents from different districts contributed to the report.]



Locals stand on the edge of a collapsed road that led to a bridge on the Panchagarh-Debiganj road in Thakurgaon. Strong currents and rising water levels caused by a flash flood resulted in the collapse of the structures, cutting off road communication. The photo was taken yesterday. PHOTO: QUAMRUL ISLAM RUBAIYAT

Import helps push the rice prices down

FROM PAGE 1 importers to bring in 15.92 lakh tonnes of rice, said food ministry sources, citing relevant documents. Those importers will have to import and sell the rice in the market by September 25, they said. "We are very hopeful that the prices will go down further. We will stop the import before harvesting of paddy in the Aman season so that local farmers don't have to incur any loss," Mosammat Nazmanara Khanum, secretary at the food ministry, told The Daily Star. Farmers had a bumper yield in the Boro season this year. The Department of Agriculture Extension estimated that over two crore tonnes of paddy were harvested that season. Yet, rice prices did not go down, raising consumers' eyebrows. Before the Boro season, per kg of coarse rice shot up to Tk 52 as the government stock hit a record low. Even though the government stock increased after 9.32 tonnes of Boro rice and 3.50 lakh tonnes of other varieties of rice were collected from the internal market, the price did not decrease. As of August 24, the government

had a total food stock of 17.25 lakh tonnes, including 14.09 lakh tonnes of rice. The rest was paddy, wheat, and flour. Last year towards the end of August, the total food stock stood at 13.14 lakh tonnes, including 9.85 lakh tonnes of rice. Anwar Hossain, owner of Barishal Rice Agency in the capital's Mohammadpur, said coarse rice called Gutu Swarna was selling for Tk 50 a kg at his shop. The price dropped to Tk 46 on Thursday. Anisur Rahman Jewel, owner of Jewel Rice Traders in Dinajpur, said the lowest price for a 50 kg sack of rice is Tk 1,900 in the local market. "It means a kg will cost Tk 38. The same rice was Tk 44 a kg a month ago," he said. The price of fine rice Nazrishaail is Tk 54 to Tk 56 a kg in the wholesale market, he said, adding that the price of per kg of rice fell by Tk one or two. Experts say as the government already has a moderate stock and the millers and traders also have a good stock, the private imports will reduce the rice prices further. "We've already seen the impact of the rice import in the market. The price

will further drop once the imported rice hits the market," said Asaduzzaman, former research director of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS). "We will permit other importers if one of the current importers fail to import rice even after getting permission," said Mahbubur Rahman, senior assistant secretary of the food ministry. If imported from India, per kg of rice will cost Tk 32.49 and if imported from Thailand, it will cost Tk 38.10, the ministry sources said. M Shawkat Ali, former adviser to a caretaker government, said it is being seen that the price of rice in the international market is lower than that in the local market. Importing rice will only benefit the traders, not the farmers. The government has to keep eyes on this issue as well. "So it seems the production cost of rice in the country is higher than in other countries. So the government should provide subsidies to farmers. Otherwise, the interests of local farmers and consumers will not be protected," he said.

UN issues urgent appeal to help drought-hit Afghan farmers

AFP, Rome The United Nations yesterday issued an urgent appeal for aid for some seven million Afghan farmers in the war-ravaged nation facing the threat of severe drought. Covid-19 has further squeezed agricultural workers in the country, which is now controlled by the Taliban after they toppled the US-backed government this month. The UN's Food and Agricultural Organization said the farmers worst affected by a drought in the country are among some 14 million people -- or one in three Afghans -- who are "acutely food insecure and need urgent humanitarian assistance". "Urgent agricultural support now is key to counter the impact of the drought and a worsening situation in Afghanistan's vast rural areas in the weeks and months ahead," FAO director Qu Dongyu said in a statement.

9 children among

FROM PAGE 1 was carrying around 100 people, witnesses said. Among the rest of the deceased, 11 were women and two were men. Meanwhile, five staffers of two sand-carrying vessels that hit and capsized the boat were arrested following a case over the incident. The boat left Champknagar area for Brahmanbaria town and collided with a small dinghy and its boatman lost control. The boat was then hit by two sand-carrying vessels coming from the opposite direction and capsized, said survivors and witnesses. One of the causes of the accident was carrying excessive passengers in the engine run boat, said Faruque Mia, a passenger who survived the incident. Selim Mia, who lost four relatives, filed a case against seven staffers of two sand-carrying vessels with Bijaynagar Police Station under The Inland Shipping Ordinance, 1976 and Penal Code, said Intiaz Ahmed, officer-in-charge of police's special branch in Brahmanbaria. Five of the accused -- Jamir Mia, the master of one of the vessels; his two associates Khokon Mia, Rasel Mia, and two staffers of another vessel Mistu Mia and Solaiman Mia -- were so far arrested, he said. Police also seized two sand-carrying vessels involved in the accident. Meanwhile, the fire service stopped the rescue operation till writing of this report in the evening confirming the death of 22 people in the incident. Akhtaruzzaman, assistant director of the Fire Service and Civil Defense in Brahmanbaria, said no one else was missing in the boat sinking incident. However, if anyone claims that their relatives are still missing, we will conduct a rescue operation again, he added.

US warship transits Taiwan Strait after Chinese assault drills

REUTERS, Washington A U.S. warship and a U.S. Coast Guard cutter sailed through the Taiwan Strait on Friday, the latest in what Washington calls routine operations through the sensitive waterway that separates Taiwan from China, which claims the self-ruled island. The passage comes amid a spike in military tensions in the past two years between Taiwan and China, and follows Chinese assault drills last week, with warships and fighter jets exercising off the island's southwest and southeast. The Kidd, an Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer, accompanied by the Coast Guard cutter Munro, transited "through international waters in accordance

with international law," the U.S. Navy said in a statement. "The ships' lawful transit through the Taiwan Strait demonstrates the U.S. commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. The United States military flies, sails and operates anywhere international law allows," it said. The U.S. Navy has been conducting such operations every month or so, angering China, which sees Taiwan as its territory and has never renounced the use of force to bring the democratic island under its control. China on Saturday called the move "provocative," saying the Eastern Theater Command of the People's Liberation Army organized troops to follow, monitor and guard the course of the U.S. ships operations.

US kills IS 'planners' after Kabul carnage

FROM PAGE 1 Taliban - as it winds up its mission by a Tuesday deadline set by President Joe Biden. Biden promised on Thursday that Washington would hunt down the perpetrators after nearly 100 Afghans and 13 US troops were killed in the blast, the most lethal incident for US troops in Afghanistan in a decade. An overnight US drone attack killed two Islamic State planners and wounded another in Nangarhar province, US Army Major General William Taylor said on Saturday, referring to an eastern area that borders Pakistan. The Taliban condemned the US strike. "The Americans should have informed us (Taliban) before conducting the air strike, it was a clear attack on Afghan territory," a Taliban spokesman told Reuters, adding that two women and a child were wounded in the attack. The Taliban have said they have arrested some suspects involved in the airport blast. Spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid also said the Taliban would take over the airport "very soon", after US forces withdraw, and announce a full cabinet in the coming days. The Western-backed government and Afghan army melted away as the hardline Islamist militants entered the capital on Aug 15, leaving an administrative vacuum that has bolstered fears of a financial collapse and widespread hunger.

Mujahid told Reuters the group had appointed governors and police chiefs in all but one of Afghanistan's 34 provinces and would act to solve the country's economic problems. A US official yesterday told Reuters there were fewer than 4,000 troops left at the airport, down from 5,800 at the peak of the evacuation mission. Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby later confirmed to reporters that the withdrawal had begun but declined to say how many service members remained. Thursday's suicide blast, claimed by ISIS-K, the Afghan affiliate of Islamic State, caused a bloodbath outside the gates of the airport - where thousands of Afghans have gathered to try to get a flight out since the Taliban returned to power. The US led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001 overthrew the then-ruling Taliban in punishment for harbouring the al-Qaeda militants behind the Sept. 11 attacks that year. The Taliban, facing the loss of billions of dollars of aid for the country, appealed to the United States and other Western nations to maintain diplomatic relations after their withdrawal; Britain said that should only happen if the Taliban allow safe passage for those who want to leave and respect human rights. The White House said the next few days were likely to be the most dangerous of the evacuation operation. The United States and allies have taken about 111,900 people out of

Afghanistan in the past two weeks, the Pentagon has said. US officials said another attack against the Kabul airport was a near certainty. The US Embassy in Kabul warned Americans to avoid the airport. US media, including the New York Times, cited health officials saying Thursday's blast had killed up to 170 people, not including the US troops. Most of the more than 20 allied countries involved in airlifting their citizens and Afghans out of Kabul said they had completed evacuations by Friday. A US official said a reaper drone flown from the Middle East struck an Islamic State militant who was planning attacks and was in a car with an associate. Residents of Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar, said they had heard several explosions around midnight and community elder Malik Adib said three people were killed and four were wounded in an air strike, adding that he had been summoned by the Taliban investigating the incident. "Women and children are among the victims," said Adib, though he did not have information about their identity. The US military statement said: "We know of no civilian casualties." While Kabul's airport has been in chaos, the rest of the city has been generally calm. The Taliban have told residents to hand over government equipment including weapons and vehicles within a week, spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said.

Bangladesh, India

FROM PAGE 1 at their own expense, according to a circular issued by the Indian Ministry of Civil Aviation yesterday. Passengers holding tourist visas, however, will currently not be allowed to enter India, it said. With rising demands in Bangladesh to resume flight operations, Bangladesh had proposed to India to resume the air bubble agreement from August 4 as infections in both countries have decreased significantly in recent days. In response, the Indian Ministry of Civil Aviation issued a circular stating that it may resume the arrangement from September 3. The circular said India's civil aviation ministry examined the proposal in consultation with the local health authorities and would recommend the resumption of operations with seven flights a week. Three Indian airlines will operate over a week -- 3 Spicejet flights; 2 Indigo flights and two Air India flights. The flights will operate from the Indian cities of Delhi, Kolkata and Chennai to Dhaka. The Indian side is now awaiting information of the flight details from the Bangladesh side. Air bubble arrangements are temporary arrangements between two countries aimed at restarting commercial passenger services when regular international flights are suspended as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. They are reciprocal in nature, meaning airlines from both countries enjoy similar benefits. According to a circular issued by the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (Caab) on August 16, any passenger from India can travel to Bangladesh irrespective of Covid-19 vaccination status. India yesterday sought further clarification on the categories of passengers who will be currently allowed to travel to Bangladesh from India.

12 Bangladeshis on their way

FROM PAGE 1 could not be known immediately, she added. The other six Bangladeshis were scheduled to fly last night, she said. They would fly in the flight that will also carry about 160 Afghan students of Asian University for Women (AUW) in Chattogram, she added. The three officials of Brac International were trying to arrange another flight soon, Shams said, adding, "We will help in any way we can to help them return home." The 15 Bangladeshis and 160 were supposed to fly from Afghanistan to Bangladesh last Thursday and they also went to the Hamid Karzai

International Airport but the flight was cancelled at the last moment following the bomb blasts that killed nearly 100 people, including Afghans and US troops. There were about 30 Bangladeshis stranded in Afghanistan since the Taliban's seizing control of the country on August 15 following the withdrawal of US troops. Three Brac officials were evacuated to Kazakhstan under UN arrangements on August 23 and two others to Qatar under UN arrangement. The rest of the Bangladeshis stranded were yet to approach Bangladesh authorities for returning, Mashfee Binte Shams said.

Result backlog a cause for alarm

FROM PAGE 1 in Sirajganj 10 days to find a lab willing to test 1,044 samples, including that of Asma. The samples eventually arrived at the National Institute of Laboratory Medicine & Referral Centre (NILMRC) in Dhaka on August 20, an official said. On August 12, the NILMRC had around 23,000 pending tests, said a DGHS official preferring not to be named. The centre usually tests around 3,000 samples a day. Through sources at the health directorate, this correspondent learnt that Asma, not her real name, tested positive for Covid and that the NILMRC on August 23 sent the result to the Management Information System (MIS) at the health directorate to disseminate the result. But Asma's son yesterday told The Daily Star that the family was yet to get the official message from the MIS. Of the 1,044 samples sent from Sirajganj on August 10, 186 tested positive, according to officials involved in the process. People have also been suffering long delays in the capital. Mamun Hosen's nasal swab was taken at a government facility in Dhaka on Monday, last week. He received the text from the health directorate informing him that he had tested negative on Thursday night. "My mother's sample was tested

at a private lab earlier this month and we got the result in six hours," he said, adding that he could not go to work for a few days due to the delay. About a month ago, government facilities in Dhaka usually sent test reports to people within 48 hours. In remote areas, it usually took about four days. But the wait started getting longer as more people started to get tested and more new cases were detected, officials said. Officials said understaffed PCR labs and the MIS caused the pile up of cases. Whenever transmission increases, the understaffed labs outside Dhaka fail to cope with the number of samples. "We dealt with large numbers of samples after the second week of July," Mahbuba Zamil, head of virology at the Institute of Public Health, told The Daily Star yesterday. Besides, several labs in Dhaka and outside remain underutilised. For instance, 1,317 samples were tested at the RT-PCR lab at Savar's Bangladesh Livestock Research Institute (BLRI) on August 3 while the number of samples tested on Thursday was only 250. Better coordination from the DGHS could have maximised the use of available resource, officials said. When this correspondent called the hotline for Covid-19 on Thursday,

a DGHS employee said, "No one has been receiving test results before a week is gone since the sample is collected. The MIS employees are now making entries of the test results they received from different labs on August 17." "Last week, the NILMRC and the Institute of Public Health (IPH) in Dhaka received more samples than usual. This caused the delay in delivering the test results," MIS Director Mizanur Rahman told The Daily Star on Thursday. He said the backlogs will be addressed soon. "Since we have not received the results yet, we thought she tested negative," the 30-year-old son of Asma Begum told The Daily Star yesterday. "Around 80 percent people carrying the virus show no symptoms. We cannot say that the woman [Asma] had infected others," Dr Abu Jamil Faisal, member of the Epidemiology and Public Health Committee of the DGHS told The Daily Star on Friday. The delay means people are unsure about their infection, he said. "This will contribute to improper planning in future," he added. Prof Nasima Sultana, additional director general (administration) of the health directorate, said, "Currently, there are around 3,000 pending cases at the [NILMRC] lab."

Formal test runs kick off today

FROM PAGE 1 Dhaka city dwellers, however, may have to wait more than a year to ride the metro train because of the host of testing required to be eligible for commercial operation. Citing the experience of different countries, MAN Siddique on May 11 told the newspaper that it takes six months to a year or even more in some cases to complete all tests. After completion of all tests, the authorities will go for a trial run before launching the commercial service. The trial run may take up to 10 weeks, he said. The authorities have a plan to make at least the first stretch from Uttara to Agargaon of the 20.10-kilometre metro rail line operational by December next year. The original implementation period of the Tk 21,985 crore project was 2012-2024. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina later directed that metro services from Uttara to Agargaon be made operational by 2019, and from Agargaon to Motijheel by 2020. Failing to meet the deadline, the authorities in May 2019 said the services would be launched on December 16 this year as the country celebrates the golden jubilee of its independence.

But Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal in his budget speech on June 3 this year said activities were underway to start passenger transport in the Uttara-Agargaon section of the metro rail by December 2022. When the correspondent asked Siddique about the deadline on Thursday, he said the road transport and bridges ministry would reveal the information formally. Once complete, the metro rail -- with 16 stations -- will be able to carry 60,000 people an hour, bringing down the travel time from Uttara to Motijheel to around 40 minutes. The journey now takes about two hours on a regular day. The first set of metro trains reached Dhaka on April 21 and the depot two days later, marking a major development in the project. Bangladesh's first ever electric train was rolled out on the tracks on a test run inside the depot in the city's Diabari on May 11. Since then, the authorities have been conducting performance tests inside the depot. Meanwhile, as per the prime minister's instruction, the authority decided to extend the metro rail from Motijheel to Kamalapur. However, the physical work of the portion has not started yet.