

BANGLADESH
UPDATE



155
New cases in 24hrs



15,75,579
Total cases



27,975
Deaths



15,40,018
Recoveries

GLOBAL
UPDATE



5,211,124
Deaths



261,251,021
Total cases

World races to contain new Covid variant

AGENCIES

Fears mounted yesterday that a highly-infectious new coronavirus strain was pushing its way into Europe as the world brought the shutters down to contain the new Omicron variant.

Suspected new cases emerged in Germany and the Czech Republic, while Dutch authorities quarantined 61 passengers from South Africa who tested positive for Covid-19.

Britain yesterday confirmed its first two cases of the new strain, both linked to travel from southern Africa.

South Africa complained that it was being "punished" with air travel bans for first detecting the strain, which the World Health Organization has termed a "variant of concern".

Australia and Thailand joined the United States, Brazil, Canada and a host of other countries around the world restricting travel from the region, fearing a major setback to global efforts against the pandemic.

India has ordered more rigorous screening and testing for travellers arriving from South Africa, Botswana and Hong Kong.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday asked officials to highlight the need for monitoring all international arrivals, their testing as per guidelines with a specific focus on countries identified 'at risk'.

Scientists are racing to determine the threat posed by the heavily mutated strain, which is more transmissible than the dominant Delta variant, and whether it can evade existing vaccines.

Anxious travellers thronged Johannesburg international airport, desperate to squeeze onto the last flights to countries that had imposed sudden travel bans. Many had cut back holidays and rushed back from South African safaris and vineyards.

"It's ridiculous, we will always be having new variants," British tourist David Good told AFP, passports in hand. "South Africa found it but it's probably all over the world already."

'WORRISOME VARIANT'
But the virus has already slipped through the net with cases in Europe and Hong Kong and Israel.

Germany became the second European country to find a suspected case of the new strain, after Belgium on Friday.

The neighbouring Czech Republic was carrying out further tests on a woman who had travelled from Namibia and was suspected to have the new variant, prime minister Andrej Babis said.

The Netherlands meanwhile found

that around one in 10 -- 61 out of 600 -- people who had arrived at Schiphol airport on Friday from South Africa were positive for Covid-19. The rest tested negative.

The infected people, who flew in on two KLM flights that took off before the Dutch government announced a ban on travellers from the region, were being kept quarantined in a hotel near the airport.

"The positive test results will be examined as soon as possible to determine whether this concerns the new worrisome variant," the Dutch Health Authority said in a statement.

The Netherlands on Friday became the latest in a series of European countries to tighten its Covid restrictions.

The WHO said it could take several weeks to understand the variant, which was initially known as B.1.1.529, and cautioned against imposing travel curbs while scientific evidence was still scant, reports AFP.

The main countries targeted by the shutdown include South Africa, Botswana, Eswatini (Swaziland), Lesotho, Namibia, Zambia, Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe.

US President Joe Biden meanwhile said richer countries should donate more Covid-19 vaccines and give up intellectual property protections to manufacture more doses worldwide to stem the spread of the virus.

"The news about this new variant should make clearer than ever why this pandemic will not end until we have global vaccinations," he said.

But with memories still fresh of the way global air travel helped the spread of Covid after it first emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019, countries clamped down on the new variant.

Australia became the latest to act, banning all flights from nine southern African countries.

Thailand meanwhile restricted flights from eight countries, as did the United States, Brazil, Canada and Saudi Arabia.

EU officials agreed in an emergency meeting to urge all 27 nations in the bloc to restrict travel from southern Africa, with many members having already done so.

Vaccine manufacturers have held out hope that they can modify current vaccines to target the Omicron variant.

Germany's BioNTech and US drugmaker Pfizer said they expect data "in two weeks at the latest" to show if their jab can be adjusted.

Moderna said it will develop a booster specific to the new variant.



Child workers of the transport sector are often put in harm's way by the employers. While students in different parts of the capital have been demonstrating for safe roads, this boy, a conductor of the bus, was seen perched on the window of a bus while calling potential passengers in Lalbagh yesterday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

2 crore head to polls today

FROM PAGE 1

Nineteen registered political parties are participating in the third phase, EC data shows.

While people have been worried about the continuous polls violence, Election Commission Secretary Humayun Kabir Khandaker said the polls will be held amid "festivities".

"Right now, we don't see any reason to be fearful of possible violence. Instructions have been given to law enforcers to control the law and order," he told reporters at the EC office after a commission meeting yesterday.

Law Minister Anisul Huq told parliament yesterday that the EC has been "alert and vigilant" about election violence.

"Strict instructions have been given to law enforcement agencies to maintain law and order. The Election Commission has written a letter to the government departments concerned, requesting it to take necessary steps in this regard."

He added that the clashes have been taking place due to personal and factional conflicts and land related disputes.

On November 24, the police headquarters have asked all police forces to remain alert so that no

untoward incident takes place centring the polls.

Haider Ali Khan, deputy inspector general of operations at the PHQ, said they have started countywide raids to recover illegal firearms and narcotics to avert further polls violence.

Our Tangail correspondent reported that locals of different unions were worried about today's elections, following the death of a person in factional clashes between AL supporters in Doptior union in Tangail's Nagarpur upazila on Friday.

Returning Officer HM Kamrul Islam said the authorities have deployed additional law enforcers to avoid further violence.

Our Laxmipur correspondent reported that the situation was volatile in different unions under Ramaganj and Raipur upazilas as some of the candidates and voters alleged that many "outsiders are threatening voters with weapons and telling them not to go to polling stations".

AHM Kamruzzaman, Laxmipur superintendent of police, said law enforcers will control the situation and take prompt actions if they get any specific allegations of people carrying arms.

On October 14, the EC announced that 1,007 UPs from 63 districts

will go to polls in the third phase. But elections to seven of them were postponed over various issues.

There will be no election in 14 UPs of Chattogram's Raozan upazila as AL nominated candidates for chairmen have already been elected unopposed.

EC data shows that chairmen of 100 union parishads will be elected unopposed. Most of them are AL leaders, said party sources.

At least 337 UP members and 132 candidates for women's reserved seats were also elected uncontested.

EC data also shows that 4,409 candidates are running for chairman posts, 11,105 for reserved member seats for women and 34,632 for member posts.

Around 2.01 crore people are expected to cast their votes at 10,059 polling centres.

Meanwhile the EC yesterday announced that 707 UPs will go to polls on January 5 in the fifth phase for election, while the fourth phase is expected to be held on December 23.

For the fifth phase, candidates will be able to submit their nominations to the returning officers till December 7, evaluation of nomination papers will be held on December 9 and the last date for withdrawal of candidacy is December 15.

Quader draws flak in House

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responsible; the pedestrians were sometimes at fault, too.

"Pedestrians recklessly cross the roads."

The VIPs' tendency to not follow the traffic rules are also responsible for the disorder on roads, he said.

"I would like to assure you all that the law has not been relaxed or the punishment has been reduced in any way. The rigidity of the law, the spirit of the law remains the same as in the original. That will remain."

The minister said the Road, Transport Bill will be amended only to make it time befitting in line with the neighbouring countries.

About the students' demand for a 50 percent discount on fares for them, Quader said the government has already prepared a gazette to provide the facilities in BRTC-operated buses across the country from December 1.

BNP MP Harunur Rashid said the students had taken to the streets demanding road safety and discounted fares. But the ruling party cadres swooped on them with sticks and roads.

"I want to know what action has been taken against those who carried out the attack," he said.

In response, Quader said the

Bangladesh Chhatra League also supports the students' demands. "Someone else in the name of BCL might have carried out the attack," he added.

Our Tangail correspondent reports BCL men drove away protesting students who gathered at the Shahid Minar at Nirala Intersection in Tangail town.

Fatema Rahman Bithi, an organiser of the student protest, alleged that BCL men thwarted them from their demonstration, took away their phones, tore their posters and attacked the female students.

Asked about the matter, Mostafizur Rahman Sohel, convener of Tangail district unit of BCL, told The Daily Star that they know nothing of the incident.

Meanwhile, the second meeting on the special fares for students between the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority authorities and transport owners and labour leaders yesterday ended inconclusively.

The first meeting on the issue on Thursday was also inconclusive.

As much as 80 percent of the transport owners in Dhaka are poor, said Khandaker Enayet Ullah, secretary-general of the Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association, after the meeting.

"Some of them maintain their families by running just a bus. How will they handle the loss from taking half fare from students?"

During the meeting, Enayet Ullah proposed for setting up of a task force comprising of stakeholders to determine the loss in revenue for bus operators if half bus fare for students was introduced.

After the meeting, BRTA Chairman Nur Mohammad Mazumder urged all students to leave the street protest. The students' demands had reached the government.

"But we will need time to bring all under the structure of laws," he said.

But students of different educational institutions yesterday issued a 48-hour ultimatum to the government to meet the demands they had raised in 2018 including half bus fares and ensuring their security in public transport.

After holding a three-hour-long sit-in in front of Rapa Plaza in Dhanmondi, the students warned that they would besiege the BRTA office on Tuesday if their demands were not met.

They also said that their protest would also continue for today and tomorrow. They will also continue to check the unfit and unlicensed vehicles on the road.

Bangladesh a stopover

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Briefing reporters around noon yesterday, Md Asaduzzaman, deputy commissioner (Gulshan Division) of DMP, said police raided Khilkhet area on Friday night on information that a woman with fake Indian rupees was roaming around the main gate to Bonorupa residential area. Police arrested the woman from there and recovered fake Indian rupees worth Rs 50,000 from her.

Gleaning information from the arrestee, police later recovered fake Indian rupees from her home and picked up the syndicate's another member Taleb from Demra that same night, the DMP DC said.

Investigators said Fatema built a "special chamber" in her house to store the fake notes. Police recovered 95 sacks of fake rupees stored with 500 more sacks of marbles imported from Pakistan. This was done to dodge law enforcers.

A high official of DMP (Gulshan Division) involved in the investigation said Pakistani national Sultan is the mastermind of the syndicate and he is controlling its operations from Lahore.

His father Md Safi is also involved in the syndicate, the official added.

"Fatema visited Sultan's home in Pakistan several times. She used to call Safi her father," the DMP official said, quoting Fatema.

He said the syndicate used a "cutout system" for smuggling fake notes into India. This would allow the syndicate to keep one party in the dark about the other.

"The syndicate would just give a serial number of a fake note or a portion of a fake note to a second party. The consignment would be delivered to one party from another only if the serial number of the fake note matched," the DMP official said.

The syndicate use different border

points of Bangladesh to smuggle the currency, said police.

Asked about payments for syndicate members, the DMP official said they would have an idea about it after interrogating the arrestees.

Meanwhile, a Dhaka Court yesterday placed the two arrestees on two-day remand each in a case filed by police with Khilkhet Police Station over the recovery of the fake Indian rupees.

Ifeekhairul Islam, additional deputy commissioner (Gulshan Division) of DMP, said they had some information about the syndicate's activities, but it would take some time to have details on its members as they use the "cutout system".

"We are carrying out the investigating with the information available. We hope to trace the whereabouts of the absconding members of the syndicate soon," he told The Daily Star.

Riot police deploy after violent demo in Iran's Isfahan

AFP, Tehran

Riot police were deployed in force yesterday in the Iranian city of Isfahan, a day after violent protests over the drying up of a lifeblood river.

Security forces fired tear gas during the clashes with stone-throwers in the protest by around 500 people in the bed of the Zayandeh Rood river that crosses the central city, Fars and ISNA news agencies said.

"A limited number of arrests" were made by the security forces, according to the province's police chief.

"The situation is calm in the Zayandeh Rood riverbed and streets are empty, but I heard riot police were deployed on the Khadiji bridge," a resident who works in the area said yesterday.

Alarm bells ring

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However, Michael Ryan, executive director of the WHO's Health Emergencies Programme, cautioned against what he called "knee-jerk responses", reports The Straits Times of Singapore.

"This happens - viruses evolve and we pick up variants. It's not the end of the world, the sky is not falling in. There is this idea that we are just waiting for the next variant, and I don't want people to spend their lives worrying about that every day," he said.

The Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) yesterday said it has not found any new variant.

"We have to be very careful and maintain the health safety guidelines that include wearing masks," IEDCR Director Prof Tahmina Shirin told The Daily Star.

The spread of the Delta variant in May caused the number of new cases and deaths to soar until the end of July, forcing the government to impose strict restrictions. The government lifted those on August 19.

But the restrictions were largely ignored.

The government has so far inoculated only 20.65 percent of the population with two shots, and 33 percent got the first shot.

"This is our weakest point. We have to step up vaccination as well as enforcement of the health safety rules," IEDCR Consultant Mushtuq Hussain said.

He also recommended institutional quarantine for every one arriving from countries where Omicron has been detected.

Renowned US immunologist Anthony Fauci said reports on the new variant raised red flags, but it was possible that vaccines might still work to prevent serious illness.

"Until it's properly tested... we don't know whether or not it evades the antibodies that protect you against the virus", Fauci told CNN.

Tigresses

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That means alongside Bangladesh, who were ranked 8th at the time, Pakistan and the West Indies join Australia, India, England and South Africa and hosts New Zealand.

Friendship

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On Thursday, Fatik was carrying garbage from Panthapath to Gabtoli. He hit and killed Kabir, a garment accessories trader and a former employee of the Bangla daily Prothom Alo, on his third trip, said the Rab director.

Just the day before, Nayeem Hasan, a student of Notre Dame College, was killed after a Dhaka South City Corporation vehicle hit him while he was crossing a road in the capital's Gulistan.

Rab arrested the DSCC cleaner Md Harun from Jatrabari on Friday in connection with the accident. Like Fatik, he too was not an authorised driver of the vehicle.

Both garbage trucks caused the accidents while they were on the streets between 11:00am to 2:30pm, even though the High Court in October 2017 directed both corporations to carry out garbage removal work in the hours between 10:00pm and 6:00am.

About violating the directives, DNCC Mayor Atiqul Islam, said it has been an old practice to do the work at daytime.

"But we have now decided that all garbage trucks would operate only between 10:00pm and 7:00am in the upcoming days," he told The Daily Star.

He added that CCTV cameras and GPS trackers will be installed in all the corporation's vehicles to bring them under strict monitoring.

The DNCC will also monitor the usage of the allotted 20 litres of fuel for each trip.

Md Abu Naser, public relation officer of DSCC, said, "We [too] have taken some steps, like implementing a token system, to monitor such anomalies."

Ethiopia PM Abiy says military will 'destroy' Tigray rebels

AFP, Addis Ababa

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said his soldiers would "destroy" rebels from the northern Tigray region, in the latest instalment of state media footage purportedly showing him at the war front.

"You are comprehensively destroying the enemy, there is no going back without winning," Abiy, winner of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, said in the 34-minute clip posted yesterday to his office's Twitter page.

"We will win, the enemy is dispersing, there are areas we have to control," he added.

"Until we destroy the enemy there is no rest."

Abiy announced this week he would start leading operations against

the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which once dominated national politics but has been locked in a gruesome war with his government for the past year.

The announcement has spurred new recruitment in Addis Ababa.

The country's most famous distance runner, Haile Gebreselassie, told AFP he was determined to "sacrifice and stand for Ethiopia".

The TPLF, he added, "is destabilising our country beyond its region".

On Wednesday state-affiliated media announced Abiy had handed over regular duties to his deputy.

His move came after the TPLF reported major territorial gains, claiming this week to have seized a town just 220 kilometres (135 miles) from the capital Addis Ababa.

Bleeding has put Khaleda's life

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necessary technology and equipment, according to Alamgir, reports UNB.

"Khaleda Zia has been suffering from many diseases, but the main problem is in her stomach. The bleeding from her liver has put her life at stake -- it has to be stopped immediately," he said at a discussion yesterday.

The discussion was organised by pro-BNP student leaders of Dhaka University Central Students Union (Ducus) and All-Party Students Unity (Apsu) of the 90s at the Dhaka Reporters' Unity marking the 31st death anniversary of Dr Shamsul Alam Khan Milon, a martyr in the 90's anti-autocracy movement.

Khaleda, a 76-year-old former prime minister, was re-admitted to Evercare Hospital on November 13, six days after she had returned home from the hospital.

The BNP chief's physicians said she has been suffering from rheumatoid arthritis, diabetes, ophthalmological and dental complications.

She needs advanced treatment abroad immediately as she is also suffering from critical cardiac, kidney and liver problems, high blood sugar and low haemoglobin level, they said.

On behalf of the family, Khaleda's younger brother, Shamim Iskander, applied to the home ministry on November 11 urging the government to allow her to go abroad for better treatment.

However, Law Minister Anisul Huq said the government will consider Khaleda's appeal if she submits a fresh petition after returning to jail.

Alamgir went on to criticise the ruling party leaders for what he said were their various 'derogatory' comments on Khaleda Zia's illness.

"It is unfortunate that the ruling party leaders neither have any sense of political etiquette, nor humanitarian values."

On Dr Milon, Alamgir said he was an active political activist. His death sparked the movement that finally led to the fall of the autocratic regime.

"There are differences between fascism and autocracy. The fight we waged that time and the fight we are waging currently has a massive difference. Now the state open fires, police open fires to create a de-politicisation in the country that began on 1/11," he said.

Gayeshwar Chandra Roy, a member of the BNP standing committee, and Amanullah Aman, former VP of Ducus, were present in the programme.