

BANGLADESH UPDATE

211
New cases in 24hrs

15,81,083
Total cases

28,048
Deaths

15,45,571
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

5,368,999
Deaths

274,668,232
Total cases

VISIT TO MALDIVES

PM to push for regularising undocumented

PORIMOL PALMA

Bangladesh is deepening its ties with the Maldives, a small South Asian island nation, as part of its greater objective of regional integration in South Asia in the areas of trade, connectivity, migration and tourism.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will be visiting the Maldives on December 22-23 when she will focus on regularising nearly 50,000 of the total 100,000 Bangladeshi workers, fresh recruitment and also offer training and education facilities for the Maldivians in Bangladesh.

Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, during his visit to Dhaka in March, extended the invitation to Hasina.

The PM will hold a bilateral meeting with Maldives President at the Presidential Palace on December 23. A few agreements, including one for prisoner transfer, are likely to be signed, said Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen at the Foreign Service Academy yesterday.

During her visit, 13 armoured vehicles from the Bangladesh Army will also be handed over to the Maldives Defence department as a token of friendship.

Dhaka and Male signed four MoUs on trade, tourism, fisheries, and health in March, while in February, they signed two MoUs -- one on the training of foreign service officials and another on human resources recruitment.

In November, Maldives Vice President visited Bangladesh and shortly after that, the first foreign office consultation between the two countries was held in Male.

Private airliner US-Bangla began its direct flight between Dhaka and Male in November this year.

Officials said Bangladesh, which is graduating from the LDC by 2026 and crosses the 50 years of independence, seeks stronger relations with the regional countries for boosting trade and connectivity.

The economically advanced country of South Asia has planned more resorts, which can create job opportunities for Bangladeshis, said Mashfee Binte Shams, secretary (east) at the foreign ministry.

After the pandemic, the Maldives is focusing on improving their health systems and want specialist doctors and nurses from Bangladesh, she said.

Bangladesh High Commissioner to the Maldives Rear Admiral Mohammad Nazmul Hassan said the country mostly imports its food and a whole lot of other essentials.

Present trade between the two countries is only about \$7 million -- Bangladesh importing from Maldives worth \$3 million and exporting to Maldives worth about \$4 million.

"Bangladesh's export to the Maldives could be increased to a great extent. The export items could be vegetables, processed food, ceramics, leather goods, RMG, jute products, pharmaceutical products," he said.

"Presently, transport cost is high because our products need to be exported via Singapore or Colombo ports," Nazmul Hassan said, adding that a direct shipping line could be very helpful towards this end.

Bangladesh's exports to the Maldives is now only focusing on Bangladeshis there, though the Maldives imports food, beef and other essentials mostly from other countries, including Egypt.

"So, if we can supply products at an affordable price, Maldivians will be more than happy," he said.



The victory day followed by the weekend meant a three-day break from work for many. As offices reopened yesterday morning, the New Airport Road in the capital witnessed long tailbacks. PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

ROHINGYA CRISIS

Bangladesh 'cannot, should not' bear this alone

Says UN special rapporteur Tom Andrews

UNB, Dhaka

UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Myanmar Tom Andrews yesterday said they all, as part of the international community, have a responsibility to support the Rohingya, noting that Bangladesh "cannot and should not" bear this responsibility alone.

"A stronger commitment of resources is required for the Rohingya refugees and host communities. And the government of Bangladesh needs and deserves a stronger international partnership," he said while speaking

at the end of his first official visit to Bangladesh.

The cause of this crisis and the resolution of this crisis is not in Bangladesh, but in Myanmar, stated the UN expert.

Andrews said he looks forward to working with Bangladesh as a friend, to returning here to continue his reporting, and also to continue my conversations and engagement with the remarkable people here.

"Most of all, I look forward to returning to a Myanmar where justice, human rights and human decency finally prevail, and I can meet with the

Rohingya community not as refugees but as citizens in their own country, Myanmar."

The UN Special Rapporteur, in his pre-departure media briefing at a city hotel, thanked and commended the government of Bangladesh for providing Rohingya refugees with refuge from the atrocity crimes committed against them in Myanmar.

He visited Bhashan Char Island where the government has so far relocated nearly 19,000 refugees.

"It's clear to me from my conversations with Bangladesh

SEE PAGE 5 COL 5

Starts today with JP; BNP undecided

FROM PAGE 1

The prime minister, BNP, is yet to clarify its position on whether or not it will join the talks.

A senior leader, wishing anonymity, said their party might not join as they think the new EC will be formed "as per the ruling party's wish".

He said that instead of joining the dialogue, they have a plan to send a letter to the president with their observations and recommendations regarding the reconstitution of the EC.

At the talks today, opposition of the parliament Jatiya Party will emphasise on enacting a law on the formation of the EC in line with the republic's constitution, said GM Quader, JP chairman and deputy leader of the opposition.

Mujahidul Islam Selim, president of the Communist Party of Bangladesh, said they "don't see the necessity of a dialogue with the president."

"We had given our recommendations and suggestions at the last dialogue with president [in 2016]. He did not keep his words. He appointed an EC that conducted election the night before voting day.

"If he were sincere [about EC formation], he could have urged the parliament to make a law in line with constitution about EC formation instead of arranging such dialogues."

Khalequzzaman, general secretary of Socialist Party of Bangladesh, and Saiful Haq, general secretary of Revolutionary Workers Party, both said they were yet to decide if they would join the talks.

They added that they would finalise their decisions after consulting within their parties and with the Left Democratic Alliance.

Khalequzzaman said the president's office invited his party to join the dialogue on December 26.

He and Saiful both said they would urge Hamid to take steps to enact the EC formation law if they join the talks.

Selim and Saiful said they were yet to get invited.

President's Press Secretary Joyнал Abedin said Hamid would sit with Jatiya Samaitantrik Dal (Inu) on December 22 and the National Awami Party on December 26.

Though over 49 years have passed since the constitution prescribed a specific law for appointing the CEC and other election commissioners, successive governments chose not to enact one.

Most other South Asian countries, however, have such laws.

As there is no specific law, the president in 2012 and 2016 had formed "search committees" to appoint the CEC and other commissioners, following discussions with registered political parties.

'Never break the chain of command'

FROM PAGE 1

The prime minister was addressing the celebration of BGB Day-2021 at its headquarters here as the chief guest, joining it virtually from her official residence Ganobhaban.

Hasina asked the BGB personnel to always keep in mind that discipline and chain of command are the most important for a disciplined force.

"Never break the chain of command, or else it'll harm you. Uphold the chain of command," the PM said.

On behalf of the prime minister, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan handed over the BGB Medal, President Border Guard Service Medal and BGB Medal-Service to eight members of BGB for their courageous and brilliant contribution in different activities of the force.

The prime minister hoped that BGB will move towards its desired goal as a modern border guard force as expected by Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

"I expect that BGB will continue its progress as 'vigilant sentinels of the border' as a symbol of confidence of the people of Bangladesh," she said.

Hasina said Bangladesh is now a role model for socio-economic development in the world. "We've made a revolution in the fields of electricity, communications, IT and agriculture. We've become a developing country from an LDC," she said.

Mentioning that Bangladesh is implementing "Delta Plan 2100", she said her government is committed to building a hunger-poverty-free, developed and prosperous "Sonar Bangla" for the next generation as dreamt by Father of the Nation Bangabandhu.

The PM said BGB's responsibility is to assist the administration in

maintaining the domestic law and order alongside performing their duties on the border.

She said BGB's role in parliamentary elections, city corporation polls, and other local body elections, maintaining the law and order during different emerging situations and in nation-building works have been appreciated by all.

Recalling the contributions of the BGB (erstwhile EPR) to the Liberation War, Hasina said the Father of the Nation declared the independence of Bangladesh soon after Pakistani occupation forces unleashed genocide on March 25, 1971.

Subedar Major Shawkat Ali and three other members of erstwhile EPR had spread the message (the Declaration of the Independence) to the police stations and thanas throughout the country, she said, adding that the EPR major and member had earlier been waiting with wireless sets for the message as per the directive of the Father of the Nation.

She said then the message was sent from the police stations to the leaders of Sangram Parishads formed earlier across the country as per the directive of Bangabandhu. Thus the message reached the grassroots throughout the country, she said.

"So, this force (EPR) had a special role in the Freedom Struggle, the Liberation War and the Declaration of Independence, which we always remember," said the prime minister.

Some 12,000 ERP members participated in the Liberation War and 817 members received martyrdom. EPR's member Birshrestha Shaheed Lance Nayek Noor Mohammad Sheikh and Birshrestha Shaheed Lance Nayek Munshi Abdur Rouf are the symbol of pride, she said.

Among other EPR members, eight members were adorned with the

gallantry awards "Bir Uttam," while 32 with "Bir Bikram" and 77 members with "Bir Pratik" for the outstanding contribution in the Liberation War, she mentioned.

The prime minister said they have adopted "Border Guard Bangladesh Vision 2041" to transform this force into a modern one, saying that plans have already been taken to increase its members to 92,000 by 2041.

She said BGB has been transformed into "three-dimensional forces" through the introduction of an air wing with the induction of two modern Mi-171E helicopters following the expansion of its activities more than ever before. "The BGB is now capable of carrying out its duties on water, land and air," said Hasina.

She said her government ensured women's participation in the BGB and 818 female soldiers were recruited in the force since 2015.

Hasina said work is underway to create 242 new BOPs and relocate 126 BOPs near the border. Despite various limitations, the success of BGB in protecting the border and preventing smuggling and the trafficking of women and children is commendable. In the last year, the BGB seized drugs worth Tk 850 crore and smuggled goods worth Tk 600 crore, she said.

She said they have constructed 113 infrastructures, including new quarters for new members, bungalows, soldier's barracks, modern BOPs, office buildings, water reservoirs and water treatment plants.

At the function, the government virtually opened the newly constructed 'Simanto Sammillon Kendra' (Border Conference Centre) at its Headquarters.

A smartly turned out contingent of BGB gave the salute to the prime minister throughout a spectacular parade.

ROHINGYA CAMPS

Govt orders closure of pvt learning centres

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The government has ordered closure of all unauthorised private learning centres and madrasas in Rohingya refugee camps, stating that such centres do not maintain the standards of education and hamper the activities of the authorised ones.

Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) also directed that Myanmar national anthem be played and Myanmar culture is promoted at the authorised learning centres supported by the UN and NGOs.

The RRRC order, issued on December 13 following a meeting with the UN, international and national NGOs, says NGOs and INGOs were providing informal education to the Rohingya children through around 3,000 learning centres in the camps in Cox's Bazar.

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen in a statement said informal learning using Myanmar curriculum and language was launched in the camps to improve the refugees' productivity, uphold their tradition and cultural values that would benefit their reintegration in Myanmar upon repatriation.

About the unauthorised private entities, the ministry said, "They follow their separate curriculums... Those unauthorised activities were asked to stop."

The main learning centres remain unutilised due to such unauthorised ones.

Employers to bear

FROM PAGE 1

include the service charge of the Malaysian recruiting agency, travel to and from Malaysia, and accommodation, according to the expatriates' ministry press release.

Moreover, employers will pay the immigration, visa, medical test, insurance, Covid-19 test, and quarantine fees in Malaysia, it said.

The presence of Malaysian recruiting agencies will be a new inclusion in the labour-sending process as previous recruitments were operated by Bangladeshi agencies.

The ministry expects that recruitment costs will now reduce significantly.

Andy Hall, a migrant worker rights specialist on Malaysia, however expressed doubt over the extent to which Bangladeshi workers would actually be spared the costs of migrating to Malaysia.

He said it's often the case in practice in Malaysia that an employer or agent will deduct workers' wages to cover recruitment costs, which the employers paid for in advance.

According to the International Labour Organisation, the "employer pays principle" cites that no worker should pay for a job and the costs of recruitment should be borne not by the worker but by the employer.

The costs include recruitment, travel, visa and administrative expenses and other forms of unspecified "fees" and "service charges", according to ILO.

Hall raised concerns that a lack of transparency may result in a return to illicit and syndicated recruitment activities, which could in turn lead to "systemic debt bondage and forced labour" of Bangladeshi workers newly brought into Malaysia under the deal.

Noting that the details of the MoU have not been made public, he urged both countries to do so. The signing of the MoU is expected to meet the urgent need for recruitment in Malaysia, reads a Malaysian human resources ministry statement.

Its implementation will be regulated by a Joint Working Group with members from both countries.

Bangladeshi workers are expected to be hired in various sectors including plantation, agriculture, manufacturing, services, mining, quarrying and construction.

The statement further says, as per a standard operating procedure, the workers need to complete Covid-19 vaccination in Bangladesh and RT-PCR tests two days prior to travel.

The workers are only allowed to enter through the Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

Besides, workers will have to undergo quarantine for seven days in Malaysia.

Shameem Ahmed Chowdhury Noman, secretary general of the immediate past committee of Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies, said the reopening of Malaysia's market will boost Bangladesh's labour migration sector.

He hoped that each of the licensed recruiting agencies in the country will be able to send workers to Malaysia.

As the expatriates' welfare minister promised repeatedly, hopefully there will be no option for syndication in the process, he said.

Covid booster campaign begins

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The campaign for Covid-19 booster doses started in the country yesterday with vaccinating Runu Veronica Costa, a senior nurse at Kurmitola General Hospital.

She took the first shot of the Covid-19 vaccine on January 7.

Health Minister Zahid Maleque inaugurated the drive at Bangladesh College of Physicians and Surgeons in the capital's Mohakhali.

Sixty frontliners and elderly people, who received their second jabs at least six months ago, as per the criteria, were yesterday administered Pfizer booster shots.

Apart from Health Minister Zahid Maleque, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen, Law Minister Anisul Huq, Fisheries Minister SM Rezaul Karim, Telecommunication Minister Mustafa Jabbar, Director General of Health Directorate Prof ABM Khurshid Alam, National Professor Shahla Khatun, a journalist, a police personnel and chief of Anjuman Mufidul Islam were in the list.

"I have taken the booster dose and I'm quite ok," said Momen after the event.

Health officials said all of the booster shot recipients will be observed for a week and later the campaign would be expanded countrywide.

Details to get a booster dose would be disclosed when the upgradation of Surokkha app, launched for the registration of Covid-19 vaccine, would

be completed by December 28.

At the inauguration, Maleque, however, said even if the registration process for the booster shot does not begin, people will be given the dose using different documents.

He, however, did not go into details.

He said, "We need 43 lakh Pfizer shots by January for the booster dose campaign; we have 60 lakh shots in stock and will get two crore more next month."

"More than 85 percent of all Covid deaths were aged over 60. That is why they are being given booster doses," the minister added.

So far, 28,048 people have died from coronavirus in the country.

The minister stated that other programmes for Covid-19 vaccination would continue as usual.

Around 26 percent population have so far received two shots against the 80 percent target.

In another development, the Directorate General of Health Services yesterday said the two players of the National Women Cricket Team recovered from Omicron infection completely.

"After getting complete diagnosis results, they can be released from isolation today [yesterday]," Nazmul Islam, director of Disease Control at the DGHS, said during yesterday's briefing.

He also warned of the risk of Omicron as it has been spreading across Europe very fast.

BSCIC wants 214 acres of Sal

FROM PAGE 1

forestand and implement the project," he told The Daily Star.

The land has been lying idle, he said, adding that an industrial park would create "employment opportunities for young people."

"I talked to the agriculture minister. He promised to help us get the lease," he said.

BSCIC operates under the Ministry of Industries and the matter in question is not directly related to the Ministry of Agriculture.

Syeda Rizwana Hasan, chief executive of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA), said the High Court in 2018 and 2019 asked the authorities concerned to demarcate the Madhupur Sal Forest and ensure that the communities native to the region can maintain their traditional ways of living. The court also ordered protecting the biodiversity of the forest.

"How could the BSCIC plan to set up an Industrial Park inside the Sal forest when the High Court clearly

ordered not to use the forestland for any commercial purposes?" she asked.

WHAT DOES THE LAW SAY?

In 2018, the HC ordered officials of the forest and administration to frame rules under Forest Act-1927 to ensure regeneration of Madhupur Sal Forest through plantation of indigenous species with the participation of forest-dependent people.

Section-17 of the National Land Use Policy-2001 insists that such forestland should be conserved, maintained, and expanded.

State Acquisition and Tenancy Act-1950 prevents forest from being leased out and declared forest land as non-retainable property.

Besides, the forest department's letter of no-objection is required for the construction of any structure on land belonging to the Forest Department, said a Cabinet Division circular in 2015.

In 2018, a land ministry circular requested the deputy commissioners of the district not to lease out any protected and reserved forest.