

BANGLADESH UPDATE

342
New cases in 24hrs

15,82,710
Total cases

28,055
Deaths

15,46,956
Recoveries

GLOBAL UPDATE

5,403,829
Deaths

278,694,919
Total cases

US became 'arrogant' after fall of Soviet Union: Gorbachev

AFP, Moscow

Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev yesterday said that Washington grew "arrogant and self-confident" after the collapse of the Soviet Union, leading to the expansion of the Nato military alliance.

In recent years President Vladimir Putin has grown increasingly insistent that NATO is encroaching close to Russia's borders, and Moscow last week demanded "legal guarantees" that the US-led alliance will halt its eastward expansion.

"How can one count on equal relations with the United States and the West in such a position?" Gorbachev told state news agency RIA Novosti on the eve of the anniversary of his resignation as the leader of the USSR.

He noted the "triumphant mood in the West, especially in the United States" after the Soviet Union ceased to exist in 1991.

"They grew arrogant and self-confident. They declared victory in the Cold War," Gorbachev, 90, said.

He insisted that it was "together" that Moscow and Washington pulled the world out of confrontation and the nuclear race.

"No, the 'winners' decided to build a new empire. Hence the idea of NATO expansion," Gorbachev added.

However, he welcomed upcoming security talks between Moscow and Washington.

"I hope there will be a result," he said.

Last week Moscow presented the West with sweeping security demands, saying NATO must not admit new members and seeking to bar the United States from establishing new bases in former Soviet countries.

Putin said Thursday that Washington has been willing to discuss the proposals and talks could happen at the start of next year in Geneva.

A senior US official said Washington was ready for talks "as soon as early January".

Gorbachev resigned as president of the Soviet Union on December 25, 1991, days after the leaders of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine said the USSR no longer existed.

A former KGB agent and loyal servant of the Soviet Union, Putin was dismayed when it fell apart, once calling the collapse "the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century".



The charred remains of MV Abhijan-10 in Punabalia of Jhalakathi after a fire ripped through the vessel early yesterday. Bottom, a diver goes into the Sugandha river to search for bodies or possible survivors. Passengers who suffered burns undergoing treatment at Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital in Barishal yesterday.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

Poland says Germany wants to turn EU into 'Fourth Reich'

AFP, Warsaw

The head of Poland's ruling party Jaroslaw Kaczynski yesterday said that Germany was trying to turn the European Union into a federal "German Fourth Reich".

Speaking to the far-right Polish daily GPC, the head of the Law and Justice (PiS) party said some countries "are not enthusiastic at the prospect of a German Fourth Reich being built on the basis of the EU".

"If we Poles agreed with this kind of modern-day submission we would be degraded in different ways," said Kaczynski, who is also a deputy prime minister.

He added that the EU's Court of Justice was being used as an "instrument" for federalist ideas.

Poland has been involved in a lengthy stand-off with the European Union, particularly over the judicial reforms that PiS has pushed through since 2015.

World welcomes Christmas

FROM PAGE 1

Most Australians are allowed to travel interstate over the festive break for the first time in two years, bringing a touch of Christmas sparkle even as case numbers hit record highs.

"We've all witnessed the moving scenes of people at airports after months of separation," Sydney's Catholic Archbishop Anthony Fisher said in his Christmas message.

"In such dark times, Christmas is a ray of light, a sliver of hope."

And Pope Francis is still scheduled to deliver the traditional Christmas Eve midnight mass from St Peter's Basilica.

Millions of Americans are also on the move during the busy travel days before Christmas, even as Covid infections with Omicron surpass the peak of the Delta wave and hospitals run out of space for patients.

However, thousands of them are set to face a grim holiday weekend, with major carrier United cancelling 120 flights because infection numbers had impacted flight crews and other operations.

Amid the spread of Omicron and health experts warning, two drugmakers on Thursday gave a ray of hope to billions around the world announcing their vaccines work against the new variant, which is confirmed less severe than the Delta variant.

A US Federal Drug Administration (FDA) official said data indicated that both Merck & Co Inc's and Pfizer Inc's Covid-19 anti-virals are effective against the variant.

There were encouraging signs too about hospitalisation rates from Britain and South Africa, although the head of a leading African health agency joined the World Health Organization in cautioning that it was too soon to draw broader conclusions.

Even as Omicron has begun leaving an imprint on parts of the U.S. economy, economists say it so far seems unlikely to prevent a second straight year of above-trend growth.

Increases in hospitalisations and deaths in South Africa and Britain since Omicron took hold appear to have been only gradual, and AstraZeneca and Novavax joined other manufacturers in saying their shots protect against it.

University of Edinburgh researchers who tracked 22,205 Omicron patients said on Wednesday the number who needed to be hospitalised was 68 percent lower than they would have expected, based on the rate in patients with Delta.

Imperial College London researchers reported evidence of a comparable 40%-45% reduction in hospitalisation risk.

As the charred vessel floated near the banks of the Sugandha river in Jhalakathi, many relatives gathered there yesterday in search of their loved ones even as firefighters were conducting a rescue operation.

From the vessel, lingering smoke was still coming out with an acute burning smell. Scraps of clothes, bags and shoes were littered on the floors.

Harun Mia, from Barguna's Kumarkhali, tried in vain, but could not find his daughter Rimu, an undergrad student at a Dhaka college, and his 11-year-old grandson Mudassin.

Sitting by the river bank, Harun could not hold back his tears.

Rizia Begum, 65, a resident of Burichar union, said, "My son Shahjahan (45) was a passenger of this launch. We talked at night, now I cannot find him. His mobile phone is also switched off."

Ali Akbar, 55, of Dhalua village, said his grandson Sujon, 32, worked in a garment factory in Dhaka. He called him from the launch to inform him that he was coming home.

"His cellphone has been switched off since the accident. God knows best [what happened]," he said.

Nasir Uddin of Bargun's Taltoli upazila said his mother, wife, two children and brother-in-law were returning home on the launch from Dhaka. "My wife Razia and daughter



Tragedy strikes midriver

FROM PAGE 1

lower deck. An exhaust pipe of the launch also appeared to have exploded.

While on fire, the launch drifted away by strong current to Diakul area of Gabkhan union of Jhalakathi.

Shamim, 16, a passenger, who was on the roof after failing to find room in the decks, said, "Since the evening, the launch engine developed problems. Sometimes flashes of fire were coming out through the exhaust."

"Suddenly," he said, "I heard a blast and flames all around."

Shamim, a madrasa student in Narayanganj, jumped into the river and was fortunate to find his brother he was travelling with. He got admitted to Barishal Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital (SBMCH).

Saidur Rahman, one of the survivors, said, "I smelt that something was burning, and came out of VIP cabin and saw fire. Me, my wife and brother-in-law then jumped into the cold water and swam ashore."

Locals said they saw the hellish blaze even three hours after it caught fire.

Md Elias, an employee of Gabkhan Channel toll plaza, said hearing screams of passengers around 2:10am, they advanced with eight engine boats and rescued over 100 passengers. After the launch stuck in a char, many passengers

jumped into the river and swam to safety.

Kamal Uddin Bhuiyan, deputy director of Barishal Division Fire Service and Civil Defence, who led the fire response, said they went to the scene at 3:28am, but found no staffers of the vessel.

"We found bodies lying in the cabins. Initially it seems the fire originated from the engine room."

Officials said their 15 firefighting units brought the fire under control at 5:20am. Firefighters recovered at least 31 burnt bodies.

The air on the banks of the river filled with cries of the missing relatives while crowds gather to look at the charred launch.

Coast Guard retrieved the six floated bodies of the victims who drowned after they jumped into the river with many others in their desperate effort to survive the launch fire, believed to be one of the deadliest in the country.

Jahangir Ahmed, deputy assistant director of Jhalakathi district's Fire Service and Civil Defence, said of the dead, 20 were burned to death while the rest others died in suffocation and heat.

At least seventy-two injured passengers were rescued from the launch with assistance from Coast Guard, locals, police and local volunteers. They

were sent to several nearby hospitals, fire officials said.

Among the injured, 70 have been admitted to SBMCH.

"A 50-member special team of doctors and nurses is on its way to join us from Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery in Dhaka," said SBMCH Director Saiful Islam.

Expressing profound shock and sorrow at the loss of lives and injuries, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina directed the authorities concerned to ensure quick treatment of the injured and hand over the bodies to their relatives promptly.

Now in the Maldives on a state visit, she prayed for the eternal peace of the departed souls and expressed deep sympathy to the bereaved family members, and the quick recovery of the injured.

State Minister for Shipping Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury after visiting the spot and the injured at SBMCH told journalists that they heard that the launch had fitness till next year. He said a seven-member committee has been formed to investigate the accident.

Khalid told reporters at the hospital that the government will provide Tk 1.5 lakh for each of the dead and Tk

50,000 for each injured.

The vessel Abhijan-10 was more crowded than on other days when it left Sadarghat Launch Terminal in Dhaka for the southern districts. It was completely packed with people, mostly hoping to spend the weekend with their loved ones.

Barishal River Port official Mostafizur Rahman said the launch has a capacity of 650 passengers.

Firefighter Jahangir said the launch was 200 feet long and 80 feet wide. He said they found some fire extinguishing equipment which were not used during the accident.

The staffers of the launch seem to be inefficient as they did not use ladders, dropped the anchor or tried to tie up the launch with a tree though they could manage to take the launch ashore. They jumped off for safety instead of making the efforts, he added.

Barishal Divisional Commission Md Saiful Hasan Badol said it seemed that the master was not skilled.

Although the launch operated on Dhaka-Barguna route regularly, the complaint about its engine was not new. Recently, it got stuck in a char, he added.

[Habibur Rahman and Sushanta Ghosh contributed to this report]

Chaos and cries

FROM PAGE 1

Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery admitted to the surgery (male) unit, 20 to surgery (female) unit, and eight to surgery (children) unit. At least eight to 10 patients suffered burns in the respiratory tract, said Assistant Prof Md Ferdous of surgery (male) unit.

Most of the patients suffered eight to 20 percent burns to their bodies, Saiful said.

Doctors said 50 percent of the patients suffered burns. Patients with burns to their respiratory system were suffering more as they did not get liquid meal.

Injured passengers with more than 50 percent burns to their bodies were referred to Dhaka for improved treatment.

The 16-bed burn and plastic surgery unit of Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital was opened in 2015, but it has been out of service for the last two years.

It was closed after the then only senior consultant, Azad Sajal, of the unit died in an accident on April 28, 2020, said AHM Saiful Islam, director of the hospital.

He said burn patients are now treated at the medicine or surgery unit. Amid such a situation, a 50-member team from Sheikh Hasina National

Nusrat are still missing," he told The Daily Star yesterday evening.

Ten-year-old Taifa and her father Bashir Uddin were coming back to their Barguna home after getting her grandfather Ali Shikder, a cancer patient, treated in Dhaka.

Ali Shikder jumped into the river to save his life while Taifa and her father were stuck in the launch. Taifa was burnt to death while her father was severely injured. Her grandfather Ali Sikder is still missing.

Rasel, a day labourer from Barguna's Dhalua, said he was on board with his wife, two children and mother-in-law. He found the body of his mother-in-law, but his wife and children were still missing.

Some survivors at the Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital said they could not yet find their family members.

Ten-year-old Marzia said she was returning home in Betagi of Barguna, along with her mother and sister. The trio jumped into the river together. Marzia found her mother at the hospital's ICU, but her sister was still missing.

'WE WILL DIE TOGETHER'

Just before the tragic fire, newlywed couple Al Amin Hawlader and Sumaiya Begum, was experiencing the scenic beauty of the Sugandha river at midnight and could see the Barguna launch terminal, nearly a kilometre away from the vessel.

Sumaiya's cousin Tuhin, his wife and two-and-a-half-year-old daughter Tabassum were also on board, sleeping.

Suddenly the launch turned towards a nearby char. When they turned back, they saw a flame engulfing the vessel.

Search for the loved ones

FROM PAGE 1

"Panicked people in a rush were throwing their luggage overboard and jumping into the river. Suddenly the vessel's engine broke down and the tide carried it to the middle of the river," said Al Amin.

"My wife and I came to the ground floor and decided to jump. But she said she can't swim... she said 'if we live, we will live together... if we die, we will die together'," said the husband.

Sumaiya caught hold of her husband's waist and a bag to stay afloat. They floated on the river for an hour and a half until villagers, in a dinghy boat, came to their rescue.

"It's like a dream that we survived," said Al Amin while being treated at Barguna General Hospital.

A Fire Service team rescued Sumaiya's cousin and his wife. But their little baby remained missing.

Christmas today

FROM PAGE 1

In separate messages, President M Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina greeted members of the Christian community and urged them to celebrate while maintaining health safety guidelines regarding the pandemic.

The president said Bangladesh is a shining example of communal harmony.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in her message, called upon the people to unite and build a happy and prosperous Sonar Bangla.

She also urged everyone to celebrate while maintaining social distance.

She said religion belongs to individuals while festivals are for all.

Russia fines Google \$98m over banned content

AFP, Moscow

A Moscow court slapped Google with an unprecedented hefty fine of nearly \$100 million yesterday as Russia ramps up its pressure on foreign tech giants.

Moscow has piled fines on the world's biggest internet platforms, accusing them of not moderating their content properly and interfering in the country's affairs.

But so far fines on Facebook parent company Meta, Twitter, Google have stretched into the tens of millions of rubles, not billions.

However yesterday a Moscow court fine Google a record 7.2 billion rubles, (\$98 million, 86 million euros), the court's press service said on Telegram, for repeatedly failing to delete illegal content.

The content was not specified, but Russia regularly takes legal action for not removing content it labels illegal, such as pornographic material or posts condoning drugs and suicide.

"We'll study the court documents and then decide on next steps," Google's press service told AFP.

Interfax news agency said that the massive fine was calculated as a percentage of Google's annual earnings and was the maximum penalty for a repeated violation.

Meta -- which has a hearing in court later today on the same charges -- has also been threatened with a revenue-based fine.