

**BANGLADESH UPDATE**



495

New cases in 24hrs



15,84,518

Total cases



28,063

Deaths



15,48,416

Recoveries



GLOBAL UPDATE



5,434,319

Deaths



283,402,425

Total cases

## DHAKA-MAWA-BHANGA EXPRESSWAY

# Project cost to go up again

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The cost of Dhaka-Mawa-Bhanga Expressway project is set to rise again as the authorities are going to do some additional work, mainly to ensure road safety.

The work includes construction of some 20 footbridges and remodeling the Mawa and Pachchar roundabouts. If the revised proposal is approved, the cost of the project would go up to Tk 11,043 crore, up by Tk 40 crore from the current cost.

Moreover, the project deadline has already been extended to June 2022.

All these developments come around two years after the opening of the 55-kilometre expressway, from Dhaka's Jatrabari to Faridpur's Bhanga, by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in March last year.

The four-lane expressway with service lane on both sides is being considered as the country's most expensive road considering the per kilometre construction cost (around Tk 200 crore), officials said.

To ensure smooth movement of traffic across the Padma bridge, the government in May 2016 took up the project to widen the road involving Tk 6,252 crore.

The project deadline was set at April 2019.

In December 2016, the authorities approved a special revision of the project adding Tk 640 crore, mainly for land acquisition.

But in 2018, a separate Development Project Proposal (DPP) was approved with a cost of Tk 4111.85 crore for including more elements in the project and the deadline was fixed at June 2019.

Officials said a project with two DPPs is a rare case. The total cost of the project has gone up to Tk 11,003 crore.

The scheme has witnessed 92.63

percent progress so far. A project of Roads and Highways Department, it is being implemented by Bangladesh Army.

**WHY COST ESCALATION AGAIN?**  
On December 15, the Divisional Project Evaluation Committee held a meeting on the revised DPP, with Road Transport and Highway Division Secretary Nazrul Islam in the chair.

According to the meeting minutes, an additional Tk 148 crore would be required for some additional works of the project.

Around Tk 48 crore would be needed for remodeling Mawa and Pachchar roundabouts, construction of some additional side roads and Tk 14.47 crore for earth works.

Besides, about Tk 85.68 crore would be required for the construction of some 20 footbridges, fencing and some other works.

"In fact, all these will be done to enhance road safety measures," an official involved in the project said.

However, the project authorities have saved more than Tk 100 crore from different works, including consultant's fees, and shifting of utility lines.

Adjusting all these costs, the revised DPP proposed to increase the project cost by Tk 39.94 crore, reads the document.

The meeting also directed the project authorities to ensure its completion within the revised deadline of June 2022.

The prime minister opened the expressway on March 12 last year. However, its users will get full benefits once the construction work of the Padma bridge is completed.

People will then be able to reach Bhanga from the capital (around 75km) within an hour. However, they will have to pay toll for using the expressway.



Traders on boats selling different varieties of rice at the floating market on the Sandha river in Barishal's Banaripara upazila. Farmers from surrounding villages send their harvests to the centuries-old rice market, where they are sold on Saturdays and Tuesdays. The photo was taken on Tuesday.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

## Better equipped now; worries still there

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But that was not to be, at least for some months, as the government practically put all its eggs in one basket. The supply of shots from India stopped and the campaign was in disarray by April. Things became grimmer with the emergence of the Delta variant in May.

Eventually, the supply of shots was ensured from various sources, including China, but the Delta raged on, shooting oxygen demand through the roof, costing lives and exposing again the government's incapacity in hospital management and timely project implementation.

"There were crises over vaccine supply and Delta variant transmission and hospital management initially. The government managed to deal with those issues well at last," Prof Nazrul told The Daily Star.

Now the Omicron variant has become a cause for concern. Seven cases have been reported so far in Bangladesh and experts warn of trying times ahead.

**VACCINE ROLLOUT**  
The drive to properly inoculate 80 percent of the population began in February using Oxford-AstraZeneca's Covishield vaccine produced by Serum Institute of India (SII).

The campaign suffered frequent hiccups mainly due to a shortage of doses caused by a yawning gap between supply commitments and actual deliveries, forcing the government to stop administering the first of the two doses on April 26.

Gradually, the situation improved

with supplies from the US, China and Japan, prompting the government to resume administering the first dose on June 19. The lion's share of the shots was bought from China.

As of December 27, around 4.87 crore or 28 percent of the targeted population received the two shots.

The government also introduced booster shots on December 28.

**DELTA**  
The country started seeing a steady decline in the number of daily cases in February. People were expecting some sort of new normal in the days ahead and the government was even thinking about reopening schools that had been closed since mid-March 2020.

However, infections started rising from March amid disregard for health safety guidelines nationwide.

The government imposed restrictions on movement, initially between April 5 and 11, and then extended them in phases.

The transmission started to decline a little towards the end of April but things changed for the worse in the months that followed.

Despite lockdowns enforced on July 1, Delta swept across the country, taking lives. On July 28, the all-time highest 16,230 people tested positive for Covid. On August 5 and 10, the daily death toll was 264, the highest ever.

During this time, hospitals across the country were stretched to their limits. Nationwide ICU bed occupancy was more than 90 percent and general bed occupancy was over 80 percent until the end of July.

The demand for oxygen in hospitals rose to 210 tonnes a day when the local production capacity was around 120 tonnes a day.

The government had then failed to install in time the built-in oxygen supply systems in all the hospitals it had planned to. There was a high-flow oxygen supply device shortage, which has been attributed to the deaths of at least 16 Covid patients in Satkhira, Rajshahi and Bogura between June 30 and July 7.

Around 58 percent of the 28,062 Covid deaths, as of December 28, were recorded after the emergence of Delta.

**MAJOR INCIDENTS**  
Irregularities in the health department did not stop even during the pandemic.

On September 20, the health ministry cancelled the process for appointing 2,839 people for the posts of medical technologists, technicians and cardiographers due to what it called ambiguity in the answer scripts of the written test.

The understaffed health department continued to struggle in delivering quality healthcare.

A total of 17 important documents, mostly related to purchases, went missing on October 28 from the health ministry.

The ministry formed an investigation committee and suspended four employees as per the committee's recommendation.

But the reason behind the files going missing is still shrouded in mystery.

## Ray of hope for 6 sugar mills

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crore, with Setabganj Sugar Mills racking up the most losses of Tk 84 crore, according to the BSFC.

Commercial production at the six mills will begin within 30 months of signing the final agreement with the consortium, according to Md Emdad Hossain, a local representative of the investors.

The consortium will supply a high-yielding variety of sugarcane to local farmers at free of cost such that there would be enough raw materials to keep the mills running around the year.

The high-yielding variety of sugarcane can produce 80 tonnes of sugarcane per hectare per year, according to Hossain. The local variety yields 20 tonnes of sugarcane per hectare per year.

The consortium will produce food products from the sugarcane by-products and high-end spirits that would be sold abroad.

As per its projections, the consortium will be able to recoup its investment within eight years, Hossain said.

Of the \$1 billion to be invested, the Japan Bank for International Cooperation and the Export-Import Bank of Thailand will provide 70 percent of the sum.

The remaining 30 percent will come from the consortium, which will form a 50:50 joint venture with the BSFC that runs the 15 state-owned sugar mills. Previously, the consortium wanted the JV to be 60:40 in its favour.

"We do not have a financing problem for the project as the necessary feasibility study has been conducted -- it will be a commercially viable project," Hossain added.

Contacted, Industries Minister

Nurul Majid Mahmud Humayun acknowledged the government is close to wrapping up negotiations.

The most viable proposal to make the mills profitable has been selected, he said.

The BSFC has received seven investment proposals from foreign investors for upgrading the sugar mills.

"They will produce different by-products in line with sugar production all year round."

At present, the production lines run for only three to four months in a year, so the government has to provide a huge subsidy to meet the overheads, he said.

All the state mills will be modernised in phases to make those profitable and to uphold the sugarcane farmers' livelihoods, Humayun added.

Of the 15 sugar mills under the BSFC, only one is profitable: Carew & Co.

Between fiscals 2015-16 and 2019-20, the BSFC logged in losses of Tk 3,976 crore. It has bank loans of about Tk 7,895 crore and owes about Tk 521.8 crore in arrears to workers.

"We are very positive about the proposal to modernise the sugar mills to make BSFC profitable," said SM Alam, who is leading the negotiations in the industries ministry.

The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) had a couple of queries before giving the nod to the foreign investment. The queries pertain to the government's share in the venture and the guarantee for the foreign companies' investment.

The deal will close swiftly once all PMO's queries have been answered, said Alam, additional secretary to the state-run corporation under the industries ministry.

## Kuwait swears in fourth govt in two years

AFP, Kuwait City

A new Kuwaiti government was sworn in yesterday, the oil-rich Gulf emirate's fourth in two years, after the last one resigned in November amid political deadlock.

Kuwait has been shaken by disputes between elected lawmakers and successive governments dominated by the ruling Al-Sabah family for more than a decade, with parliaments and cabinets dissolved several times.

The last government called it quits in November in the face of a standoff with parliament over reforms.

The cabinet was sworn in before the crown prince, the official KUNA news agency reported.

It is the fourth government that Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah has formed since his appointment as prime minister in December 2019.

Kuwait is the only Gulf Arab state with a fully elected parliament, which

enjoys wide legislative powers and can vote ministers out of office.

Oil Minister Mohammed al-Fares and Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmed Nasser al-Mohammed Al-Sabah retain their posts in the reshuffle.

However, the new lineup includes a critical voice in Finance Minister Abdulwahab Al-Rushaid, who earlier this month called on government to "focus on a sustainable economy rather than on the fluctuations of oil prices".

Like most Gulf countries, Kuwait's economy and public finances have been hit by the coronavirus pandemic and the slumping price of oil.

In last year's elections, the opposition and its allies won nearly half of parliament's 50 seats.

The polls were the first since the new emir, Sheikh Nawaf, took power on the death of his half-brother, Sheikh Sabah, at the age of 91.

## Paranormal turnout

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A hundred percent turnout means that everyone listed in the voter list cast a vote. But considering the number of dead and those who have gone abroad, around 15 percent of votes must have remained not cast, said locals and sources at the local election office.

Locals have raised questions over the authenticity of the result.

They said Abdul Gafur, a resident of Bahadurganj village and listed as number 13 in the voter list of the polling centre, died on August 15 last year.

"How can a dead man cast votes?" asked Jamal Mia, nephew of Abdul Gafur.

Their neighbour, Farukur Rahman,

also died around three months ago. His serial number was six.

"My brother Md Kabir Miah went abroad around one year ago. His serial number was 108," said Monsur Ahmed, a resident of the same village.

Local youth Atikur Rahman said apart from the deceased and those who have gone abroad, many of the villagers also did not go to the polling station.

"So, how could cent percent votes be cast?" he asked.

As per electoral rules, a presiding officer is responsible for conducting elections in that particular polling station, while the returning officer is responsible for all polling stations in that union.

Asked, Bargaon Government Primary School polling station's Presiding Officer Rafiqul Islam admitted that the result sheet showed that the turnout was 100 percent.

"I am looking into the matter," he added.

Returning Officer Mohammad Yunus claimed that it could have been an error of a polling official who was in a hurry.

Contacted, Faruq Mahmud Chowdhury, president of Sushasoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujon) in Sylhet, alleged that this may have happened due to casting of fake votes.

Elections to 838 union parishes across the country were held on Sunday as part of the fourth phase of UP polls.

## US sees possible progress in Iran nuclear talks

AFP, Vienna

The United States said Tuesday it had seen possible progress in talks with Iran but joined European negotiators in pressing for urgency in rolling back Tehran's nuclear programme.

Negotiations resumed Monday in Vienna in a fresh push to make headway on reviving a landmark 2015 agreement that curtailed Iran's nuclear activities in return for sanctions relief.

"There may have been some modest progress," State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters in Washington.

"But it is in some ways too soon to say how substantive that progress may have been. At a minimum any progress, we believe, is falling short of Iran's accelerating nuclear steps and is far too slow."

Former president Donald Trump in 2018 withdrew from the nuclear accord and imposed a slew of punishing sanctions, including a unilateral US ban on Iran selling its key export of oil.

President Joe Biden supports a return to the agreement but Iran has kept taking steps away from compliance as it presses for sanctions relief.

The Vienna talks began after

Biden's election but stopped in June as Iran elected a new ultraconservative government. They resumed in late November with Iran agreeing to keep talking after a brief break.

"This negotiation is urgent," negotiators from Britain, France and Germany said in a statement.

"We are clear that we are nearing the point where Iran's escalation of its nuclear programme will have completely hollowed out the JCPOA," the so-called E3 powers said, referring to the deal's official name by its acronym.

"That means we have weeks, not months, to conclude a deal before the JCPOA's core non-proliferation benefits are lost."

Israel, Iran's arch-enemy, has warned of military options if the Islamic republic's programme advances and is suspected in a shadowy campaign that has included the assassination of Tehran's top nuclear scientist.

The Biden administration has also warned of a return to pressure if talks fail and Iran pursues its nuclear work.

Iran was in compliance with the 2015 deal before Trump's withdrawal but has since taken key steps including stepping up its enrichment

of uranium, although it denies that it wants to acquire a nuclear arsenal.

On Saturday, Atomic Energy Organization of Iran director Mohammad Eslami said Tehran had no plans to enrich uranium beyond 60 percent, even if the Vienna talks fail.

Eslami said the enrichment levels were related to the needs of the country, in remarks published by the Russian news agency RIA Novosti.

In response, E3 negotiators said Tuesday that 60 percent enrichment was still "unprecedented for a state without nuclear weapons". Military-grade levels are around 90 percent.

"Its increasing 60 percent stockpile is bringing Iran significantly closer to having fissile material, which could be used for nuclear weapons," they said.

The United States did not specify areas of progress but Russia -- which is participating along with China and the Europeans -- said a working group had a "useful meeting" on nuclear issues and informal discussions on lifting sanctions.

"We observe indisputable progress," Moscow's ambassador to the UN in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, wrote on Twitter.

## Five dead, two wounded in US shooting: police

AFP, WASHINGTON

The death toll from a shooting spree across multiple locations in Colorado, which ended when the gunman was himself shot dead, has risen to five, police said Tuesday.

The trail of shooting began around 5:00 pm on Monday and unfolded across at least four different locations in the cities of Denver and Lakewood, said police, who had initially put the death toll at four.

Two women were killed and a man was wounded in the first location in Denver, police said, with another man shot dead outside his residence.

The gunman then traveled to neighboring Lakewood, where he fatally shot another man in the Lucky 13 tattoo parlor and wounded another individual.

## DSA was misused

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said, adding that the best practices will be kept in the rules to be formulated under the act.

Anisul said he also talked to the home minister to stop the law's abuse before the rules are formulated.

The minister then said a cell of the law enforcement agencies now looks into the complaint before any case is registered under the DSA. The case is registered only when it is recommended by the cell.

Also, when a journalist is sued under the act, they are not arrested right away, he said.

"This act has not been enacted to curb freedom of speech and press freedom," he said.

The DSA was passed in parliament on September 19, 2018. The journalist community has since been protesting it and demanding that several of its sections be amended to safeguard freedom of the press.

Between January and November this year, 68 journalists were accused in 32 DSA cases while the total number of cases filed under the act is 225, according to data gathered by Article 19, a UK-based human rights body that focuses on freedom of expression.

## Two killed

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After the incident, police recovered a submachine gun (SMG), five bullets and 13 bullet shells from the spot, said the SI.

Contacted, UPDF's (democratic) Information and Publicity Secretary Gati Chakma claimed that a group of men from PCJSS went to Dui Kilo area and indiscriminately opened fire on Janong Chakma, killing him on the spot. Gati said Janong was the chief of their unit in Baghaichhari.

Tridip Chakma, secretary of PCJSS chapter in the upazila, said, "None of our members was killed today. We also did not attack anyone."

"The gunfight was fought by members of UPDF and another faction of PCJSS over establishing dominance in the hills," he said.

Despite trying repeatedly, The Daily Star could not reach anyone from the PCJSS faction over phone for comments on the matter.

At least eight people, including three polling officials and four ANS personnel, were shot dead in Noymile area of Baghaichhari upazila during local upazila polls in March 2019.

## Covid cases

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variant that is taking hold across Europe.

The Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) yesterday said the new cases were detected after testing 21,079 samples during the 24-hour period.

The daily positivity rate went up to 2.37 percent from Tuesday's 2.10 percent.

One died from Covid-19 during those 24 hours, taking the total number of deaths to 28,063. The death rate is 1.77 percent.

The deceased was a man, aged between 61-70, the DGHS said in a release.

The total number of confirmed Covid cases now stands at 15,84,518. Though the number of daily deaths registered was below five since December 13, the number of daily new cases was mostly over 250, according to DGHS data.

On December 11, Bangladesh reported its first two Covid Omicron cases in two members of its women's cricket team after their return home from Zimbabwe.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh approved Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna and AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccines for use in its booster shot programme.

DGHS officials said people will not be given any option to choose booster shots, rather one vaccine from those three will be administered.

Bangladesh has been administering Oxford-AstraZeneca, Pfizer, Moderna, Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines for the first two doses.

The National Immunization Technical Advisory Group (NITAG) recommended only Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca shots be used for boosters.