

India cities see sharp fall in Covid cases

Hospitalisation low

REUTERS, NEW DELHI

India's capital Delhi and financial hub Mumbai have reported a big fall in Covid-19 infections in the past two days and most of those who contracted the virus have recovered at home, authorities said yesterday.

Mumbai's daily new infections fell below 10,000 on Sunday for the first time since early this month, after touching an all-time high of 20,971 on January 7. It reported 7,895 infections late on Sunday, Mumbai's municipal corporation said.

Delhi's cases have fallen consistently since hitting a peak of 28,867 on January 13 and was expected to be fewer than 15,000 yesterday, for the first time since early January, the city government's health minister told reporters.

Both cities have said more than 80% of their Covid-19 hospital beds have remained unoccupied since the fast-transmitting Omicron variant led to a massive surge in cases from the start of the year.

"With very large numbers of sub-clinical, asymptomatic and undetected cases, it is difficult to pinpoint a peak by new cases," Rajib Dasgupta, head of the Centre of Social Medicine & Community Health at New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, said in an email.

"In this situation, monitoring hospitalisation is more prudent; today's case can be next week's hospitalisation."

Other epidemiologists say a national peak in cases could come by early- or mid-February.

Experts have attributed the low hospitalisations to high levels of previous infections and vaccination. India has fully vaccinated about 70% of its 939 million adults and hopes to give the primary two doses to another 70 million by next month.



President Abdul Hamid and a delegation of the ruling Awami League, led by its chief Sheikh Hasina, pose for a photo at the Bangabhaban yesterday. The AL team went there to attend the dialogue with the president on the formation of the next Election Commission. With this, the president wrapped up the talks, which began on December 20.

PHOTO: PTD

Poor die from Covid while rich get richer

Warns Oxfam as 10 richest men in the world doubled wealth amid pandemic

AGENCIES

The wealth of the 10 richest men has doubled during the coronavirus pandemic, stoking inequality that contributes to the deaths of at least 21,300 people each day, according to a report released yesterday by Oxfam International.

"We enter 2022 with unprecedented concern," Oxfam's Inequality Kills report warns, arguing that the current global state of extreme inequality is a form of "economic violence" against the world's poorest people and nations.

In this deeply unequal world, structural and systemic policy and political choices are skewed in favour of the richest and most powerful, resulting in harm to the majority of ordinary people around the world, said the report, which highlighted the Covid-19 vaccine divide as a prime example.

"Millions of people would still be alive today if they had had a vaccine — but they are dead, denied a chance while big pharmaceutical corporations continue to hold monopoly control of these technologies," said Oxfam.

The report calculates that 252 men have more wealth than all one billion women and girls in Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean combined. And 10 of the world's richest men own more than the least affluent 3.1 billion people.

Moreover, while the rich got a whole lot richer during the pandemic, the incomes of 99 percent of humanity suffered.

Oxfam's report is usually released prior to the World Economic Forum (WEF) annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland — but the in-person gathering of the world's richest and most powerful has been postponed again this year due to the pandemic, reports Al Jazeera Online.

Last week, WEF released its Global Risks Report 2022 warning that the lopsided economic recovery from coronavirus, much of which has relied on the roll-out of vaccinations, has deepened divisions within and between nations.

It also stressed that growing inequality, made worse by the pandemic, is sure to cause additional tensions, resentments and further complicate nations' responses to climate change, economic disparities and social instabilities.

The coronavirus has killed at least

5,377,051 people worldwide since the outbreak emerged in China in December 2019, according to an AFP tally compiled from official sources yesterday.

The number of cases in China yesterday reached its highest level since March 2020.

With growing fears about the Omicron strain challenging China's stringent approach to virus control, a senior health official told residents of Beijing to "avoid buying goods from overseas" after saying a local case could have been infected by international post.

The United Nations said yesterday the Covid-19 crisis is continuing to hit jobs hard around the world, warning it could take years for employment levels to reach pre-pandemic levels.

In a new study, the UN's International Labour Organization revised its previous forecast that the global employment market will make a nearly full recovery from the virus this year.

Blaming the impacts of Covid variants like Delta and Omicron and uncertainty around how the pandemic will evolve, it now projects a significant deficit in working hours in 2022 compared to before Covid-19 emerged.

BNP-Jamaat paid \$2m to US lobbyists

Shahriar Alam claims in JS

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam yesterday told parliament that he has proof on how much money the BNP-Jamaat has given to US lobbying firms in the last five years.

Speaking on the thanksgiving motion on President Abdul Hamid's speech, he said the first document he had was about hiring a lobbying firm named Akin Company Associates in the US in 2015.

"An agreement containing the address of BNP's Nayapaltan office was signed with them. The agreement was valid for three years and \$50,000 was given per month meaning that six lakh US dollars were given yearly and a total of two million US dollars was paid to them in three years," said the state minister.

But he did not give any explanation why the lobbyists were hired.

Shahriar said he has 10 such documents. He said each political party submits papers on its expenditure and income before the Election Commission.

"The BNP has to be asked whether the money has been taken with the approval of Bangladesh Bank? If not, we want an investigation into whether the money of the orphans has been laundered abroad to pay the lobbying firms," the state minister said.

"We want to know that from the Election Commission through the Speaker."

DISCORD OVER MYANMAR

Asean postpones year's first meet

REUTERS

Unresolved differences about engagement with Myanmar's military rulers are causing discord among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), diplomats and government officials said, as a ministers' meeting set for this week was pushed back.

The friction follows a tumultuous final few months of 2021 after Asean took the unprecedented step of sidelining Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing from its leaders' summit in the wake of a military coup and use of deadly force against protesters.

The thorny issue of Myanmar attending Asean events remains unresolved, said Indonesian foreign ministry official Abdul Kadir Jailani.

"It must be admitted that time is still needed to unite views," Jailani, the ministry's director-general for Asian, Pacific and African affairs, told reporters.

However, Cambodia's postponement of this week's opening meeting of its term as chairman of the regional grouping was understandable, he added, since the Omicron remains a threat.

Cambodia had cited travel difficulties that prevented the attendance of some foreign ministers when it postponed the meeting last week.

Cambodia has indicated it wants to engage the junta and had invited its foreign minister to the Asean opening meet.

In recent days, Malaysia's FM Saifuddin Abdullah, and Singapore PM Lee Hsien Loong have opposed the idea of inviting back the junta, as it had made no progress on an agreed five-point Asean "consensus" on resolving the Myanmar crisis.

Search committee getting legal cover

FROM PAGE 1

President Abdul Hamid may promulgate an ordinance to turn it into an act for its quick enforcement, said a member of an AL delegation, which attended a dialogue with President Abdul Hamid on EC formation yesterday.

The senior AL leader, wishing not to be named, said the president thanked the ruling party for coming up with the draft law.

He quoted the president as saying that since almost all political parties want a specific law for the EC formation, it would now be easier for him to form the search committee.

At a press conference after the dialogue, AL General Secretary Obaidul Quader said his party proposed enacting a law to appoint the CEC and other commissioners.

Hoping that formulation of the law would be possible within a short time, he said, "Come and see, nothing is impossible."

The president has held the dialogue with 25 out of the country's 39 registered political parties. Almost all of them suggested enactment of a law for EC formation.

The dialogue, which began on December 20, ended yesterday with AL's participation.

Sources, meanwhile, said the move to enact the law was made since the government wants to avoid possible controversies over the matter.

Election experts and jurists think the move was nothing but an attempt to give legal cover

to the ECs, which were constituted through search committees.

They also raised questions over transparency in appointing the CEC and other commissioners in future.

"It seems more of a law to appoint a search committee. Will the search committee disclose the names to be proposed? Will those names be sent to parliament for discussion?" former election commissioner Brig Gen (ret'd) M Sakhawat Hossain asked while talking to The Daily Star.

Echoing his statement, Badiul Alam Majumder, secretary of Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujan), said, "The current and previous commissions formed through search committees destroyed the country's electoral system."

The ECs drew flak from the opposition parties, election watchdogs, and civil society members over holding the national elections in 2014 and 2018.

Article 118 (f) of the constitution categorically says, "The appointment of the chief election commissioner and other election commissioners shall, subject to the provisions of any law made in that behalf, be made by the President."

It suggests the law is mandatory for EC formation, but no governments had paid heed to it in the last five decades.

In the absence of such a law, there were no specific criteria on appointment of the election commissioners.

What will lead to their disqualification was also not clear.

As a result, most governments in the past constituted ECs by appointing people of their choice, experts said.

To remove controversies, a former EC, led by CEC Shamsul Huda, had drafted a proposal in 2007 to enact a law in line with the constitutional provision. The move did not get

hopefully turning the draft into a law would not take much time.

THE SEARCH COMMITTEE
As per the proposed law, the search committee will include a High Court Division judge, the comptroller and auditor general, the chairman of Bangladesh Public Service Commission, two other persons nominated by the president.

Eligibility of CEC, ECs

- » Minimum 50 years of age
- » At least 20 years of work experience in govt, semi-govt, private or judicial posts
- » No one can hold the post of CEC twice
- » A person holding the post of election commissioner might be appointed as CEC

government support at that time.

Both in 2012 and 2017, president picked CEC and four election commissioners after search committees suggested names for the appointments.

Yesterday, the cabinet meeting, chaired by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, approved the draft of "Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioner Appointment Act, 2022".

Replying to a query, the cabinet secretary said

The 2017 search committee was formed following the same structure. In 2012, the president formed a four-member search panel for appointing CEC and other commissioners.

The proposed act stipulates some eligibility criteria — the chief and other commissioners must be Bangladeshi citizens, aged at least 50, and have experience of at least 20 years in important government, semi-government, judicial

or private jobs, said the cabinet secretary.

A former chief of EC cannot be considered for the same post again. However, other election commissioners, present or former, may be appointed as CEC, he said.

Sakhawat Hossain said if the names recommended by the search committee are not discussed in parliament, the EC will not be formed through consensus.

"So, to me, it is not a full-fledged law," he said.

Badiul Alam said the search committee should make the names public twice — once when the committee will primarily consider the names and then when it will submit them to the president.

"There must be a clear explanation on why those persons were chosen. The whole exercise will be futile if transparency is not ensured," he added.

Last year, Shujan prepared a draft of a proposed law on the appointments and submitted it to the law minister.

Eminent jurist Shahdeen Malik said the representation of three major political parties in the search committee was necessary since political parties were the most important stakeholders in any election.

"Lastly, the search committee should not send a list with names of more than seven persons for the final appointment of CEC and four commissioners," Shahdeen said.

He said the search committee should work

in a transparent manner and always keep the public updated about the names.

"Only then, such a process will make the election commission more acceptable to the people," he added.

PRACTICE IN SOME OTHER COUNTRIES

In India, the president appoints the CEC and other election commissioners on the advice of the council of ministers led by prime minister. The council of ministers collectively advises the president on the appointments.

However, no law on their appointment has so far been enacted by the Indian parliament.

Other Saarc countries — Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives — apparently have a more developed mechanism to constitute their ECs through consultations and scrutiny.

In Pakistan, for example, the prime minister, in consultation with the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly, forwards three names for appointment of each commissioner to a parliamentary committee.

The parliamentary committee is constituted by the Speaker. Half the members of the committee come from the treasury bench while the other half from the opposition parties.

In Nepal, the president, following recommendation of the constitutional council led by the prime minister, appoints the CEC and election commissioners.

Transport lobby

FROM PAGE 1

These associations had even forced the government to delay the enactment and enforcement of the Road Transport Act 2018. Some of its sections are still not being enforced due to pressure from transport owners and workers.

Meanwhile, launch operators set sail at full capacity after getting "verbal directives" from Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA).

Only trains, run alone by the government, are running at half capacity while maintaining health safety measures.

THE 180 TURN

On January 10, the cabinet division issued an 11-point directive, including one that says all public transport must operate at half capacity to curb Covid-19 transmission.

The division empowered agencies concerned to fix implementation dates.

On Wednesday, transport leaders at a meeting with the BRTA demanded that the government change its mind and allow them to run at full capacity.

However, the BRTA that day issued an order saying that all buses, minibuses would have to run at half capacity from Saturday.

The circular is still there on its website but there is none cancelling the decision.

Dhaka Road Transport Owners' Association (DRTOA) the following day told its members to run their vehicles at full capacity, saying the

ministry concerned had "verbally" informed them that the government would allow them to do so.

Bangladesh Bus Truck Owners' Association, another association of bus owners who run inter-district buses, also gave similar verbal directives to its members.

BRTA Chairman Nur Mohammad Mazumder yesterday said they received a "verbal decision" from authorities concerned regarding running buses at full capacity.

"And we notified the decision to transport associations in writing," he told The Daily Star.

Khandaker Enayet Ullah, general secretary of DRTOA, said he received the written order on Sunday. He, however, denied that the government changed its mind due to pressure from them.

"There would have been a crisis of public transport had they slashed the capacity of buses [businesses and workplaces] is open.

"We raised the matter. The government understood our point and changed its decision accordingly," he told this correspondent yesterday.

Meanwhile, BIWTA Chairman Commodore Golam Sadeq said they, through the shipping ministry, had written to the Cabinet Division to change its decision on running launches at half capacity "considering everything".

"But we did not get any decision yet," he told The Daily Star yesterday.