

Govt now aims to jab 70pc population

MOUDUD AHMED SUJAN

Bangladesh now plans to inoculate 70 percent of its population with the Covid-19 vaccine – down from the initial plan of 80 percent – in line with the World Health Organisation's target.

In October, the WHO set a target for countries to vaccinate 70 percent population of their populations by mid-2022, and according to projections made by Our World in Data, about 100 countries are not on track to meet that goal.

As of January 18, 48.38 percent of the new target has been met, according to data from the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

The initial target of inoculating 80 percent of the population is not achievable, Shamsul Haque, member secretary of the Covid-19 Vaccine Management Taskforce, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Besides, the WHO's standard to achieve herd immunity is to inoculate 70 percent of the population.

"So we have revised down our target," Haque added.

So far, the government has been using Covid-19 vaccines developed by AstraZeneca, Sinopharm, Moderna, Pfizer, Sinovac, and Johnson and Johnson.

The authority has not clarified the reason behind the revision of the target, said Abu Zamil Faisal, member of the Epidemiology and Public Health Advisory Committee at the DGHS.

"Most probably, it is because of the slow pace of the vaccination, and also about the uncertainty over the vaccine supply chain," he added.

The government has about nine crore doses in its stock, according to Health Minister Zahid Maleque.

To attain the revised target, 12 crore doses of the vaccine are needed. Besides, another 2.3 crore shots need to be allocated to inoculate the 1.15 crore schoolchildren aged 12-17.

DGHS Director-General ABM Khurshid Alam, however, says the original target was just a parallax error.

"About 1.25-1.5 crore of our population live outside the country – we had counted them initially."

The non-resident Bangladeshis have now been excluded.

Moreover, children from 12-17 age groups are now getting vaccines. The original plan was to inoculate those aged 18 and above.

"Considering this, 80-85 percent of the total population will receive vaccines," Alam told The Daily Star yesterday.

Bangladesh's population is about 16.80 crore population, according to the latest population census.

The vaccination campaign began on a pilot basis on January 27 last year and on a full-fledged basis from February 7.



Traders loading cauliflower on cycle vans after buying them from a wholesale vegetable market near the Dhaka-Aricha highway in Savar's Hemayetpur area yesterday morning. They sell the vegetable in nearby markets. PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Social gatherings must stop

Health minister says as daily Covid case tally goes into five figures

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

All types of social events, including marriage ceremonies, have to be stopped as the Covid transmission has risen at an alarming rate, Health Minister Zahid Maleque said yesterday.

In 24 hours until 8:00am yesterday, the health directorate reported 10,888 cases, up 1,388 from the previous day. The positivity rate also increased to 26.37 percent from almost 25 percent the previous day.

The health minister made the statement while briefing journalists after a meeting with deputy commissioners.

The cabinet division earlier this month slapped bans on social, religious or political gatherings and rallies at open places.

Wearing mask is mandatory in all public places, including shops, markets, shopping centres, restaurants, offices and courts. Mobile courts will operate countrywide to penalise violators of the health guidelines.

The minister said his ministry has asked the DCs to implement the curbs strictly.

"The 11-point restrictions were given to rein in the spread of Omicron. The DCs have been asked to implement these ...," Maleque said.

He said the recent spike in Covid-19 cases was not a cause for panic, but a matter of concern.

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The minister added that the DCs have been asked to engage all stakeholders, including the people's representatives, in implementing the programmes.

Maleque also told reporters that several other instructions were issued to the DCs in the conference.

These include ensuring strict screening at entry points of the country and strict quarantine of Covid-19 patients.

First reported on December 9 last year, the Omicron variant has started causing a massive surge in Covid-19 cases since the beginning of January. On January 1, the number of daily confirmed cases was only 370 and the positivity rate was below five percent.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh yesterday received 3.36 lakh shots of Covid-19 vaccine developed by Johnson & Johnson from the US government as gift.

Produced by Janssen Pharmaceuticals Companies of Johnson & Johnson, this is a single-shot vaccine.

"We have received these vaccine doses under the Covax arrangement. Another consignment of the same amount [3.36 lakh] will arrive soon," Shamsul Haque, member secretary of the National Covid-19 Vaccine Deployment Committee, told The Daily Star.

Those who built Rab Let's continue

FROM PAGE 1 individual human rights record prior to deployment."

The letter pointed out that at present the screening is only done for higher ranks.

The organisations said the Bangladesh National Human Rights Commission cannot be a part of this screening process. "The NHRC cannot be objective and factual in the execution of their role in the screening process considering the ongoing reports of its politicisation and the fact that the NHRC's legal framework limits its purview over security forces, in effect exempting them from any independent oversight."

Including Rab in its peacekeeping operations presents a "reputational risk" for the UN, it said.

There is "consistent and credible evidence of abuses including extrajudicial killings, torture, and enforced disappearances by members of this unit since its creation in 2004," the letter also read.

The organisations pointed out that at the Convention Against Torture in 2019, the Committee against Torture stated that it is "concerned at reports that personnel that have served with the Rapid Action Battalion have frequently been deployed for service with United Nations peace missions".

"In March 2021, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet noted that 'allegations of

torture and ill-treatment by the Rapid Action Battalion have been a long-standing concern'," said the letter.

HRW further pointed out that on December 5, the UN Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances voiced concern about Rab being allowed to participate in UN peacekeeping operations, without any previous investigation into its involvement with human rights violations, and added that officers "involved in, or willing to tolerate abuses appear to be promoted and rewarded within the Bangladesh security and law enforcement forces".

"We are concerned that those committing grave human rights violations within Bangladesh are being rewarded by the government with deployment to UN missions abroad," stated the letter further.

Data from November 2021 shows that Bangladesh was the top contributor to UN peacekeeping missions with over 6,300 personnel deployed. Of this, the lion's share came from the combined forces, which also deploys to Rab, while a small minority belonged to Bangladesh Police.

As his attention was drawn to the matter, Commander Khandaker Al Moin, director of Rab (legal and media wing), said, "We have learnt of this issue from media, we have not received any official letter regarding this."

FROM PAGE 12

honest and direct conversations on these issues," Miller said in an exclusive interview with The Daily Star yesterday, a day before leaving Bangladesh after completing his assignment here.

Bangladesh and the US have a strong bond, with the latter being the single largest RMG importing nation, biggest donor of Covid-19 vaccines, and provider of humanitarian aid for the Rohingyas.

There are some strains in the bilateral relationship following the US sanctions on Rab and seven of its current and former officials and leaving Bangladesh off Biden's invitee list of Democracy Summit last year. Though Dhaka initially was in denial, it later requested Washington DC to reconsider the sanctions.

"Upcoming bilateral dialogues and senior officials' visits are important opportunities to do so. I think it speaks to the strength of our relationship. The United States and Bangladesh can have these candid discussions while still strengthening our close partnership," said Miller.

The diplomat said his country at times struggled with democracy and good governance, but has a magnificent system of

government, of checks and balances.

Miller said the US deeply values the friendship with Bangladesh, and that shared commitments to democracy, human rights and rule of law form the foundation of powerful partnerships.

"Let's lock arms and reaffirm our shared commitment to make our democracies better, to share ideas and learn from each other. As partners, let's do so," he said.

He said the US and Bangladesh have so much in common, from historic struggles for independence to innumerable and unbreakable people-to-people ties and bonds of affection.

"Like all friends, we don't always see eye to eye. When we don't, our relationship is strong and mature enough to have honest conversations, engage, address and move forward."

Asked how the US wants to interact with Bangladesh when it comes to its policy on Indo-Pacific where world powers are focusing, Miller said US engagement in the Indo-Pacific is not against any country nor is it designed to make anyone choose between countries.

"Instead, our engagement is about advancing an optimistic vision we have for our participation and

partnership in this region. Bangladesh is, of course, a key partner in the success of US engagement in the region."

He said China is a competitor, not an enemy and that they welcome contributions by China to regional development, so long as it adheres to the highest standards the people of the region demand and deserve, including in areas such as transparency in bidding on and awarding contracts, rule of law, and sustainable financing.

He said a free and open Indo-Pacific region is critical to the security and prosperity of the American people and its allies and partners.

Enquired about the implications of the security deal between Australia, the UK and the US (AUKUS), Miller said it will help defend shared interests in the region for generations. It also demonstrates US commitment to revitalising its alliances and strengthening them.

"Moreover, we are reaching out to our existing partners, like Bangladesh, in new ways and amplifying our ability to collaborate."

About the future focus of US in Bangladesh, the outgoing envoy said they will work with Bangladesh on Indo-Pacific and

possible," Blinken told reporters.

"We've seen, I would say, some modest progress in the last couple of weeks in the talks" in Vienna, he added.

Speaking at a joint news conference, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said that "urgent progress" was needed in talks aimed at reviving the 2015 nuclear deal. "The window for finding a solution is closing," she said. "The negotiations are in a decisive phase.

Man faces seven years for derogatory remarks on PM

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A man was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment by a Dhaka tribunal for making derogatory remarks about the prime minister on Facebook.

Judge Mohammad Ash Sams Joglul Hossain, of Dhaka Cyber Tribunal, handed down the sentence to Rashed Talukder, 34, of Tangail's Kalihati, court sources said.

According to the prosecution, Rashed on June 23, 2016, made objectionable remarks about Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, after which police arrested him under the ICT act with Kalihati Police Station.

Dhaka court adjourns Khaleda's hearing

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday adjourned till March 6 the hearing of the charges framed against BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and six others in the Barapukuria coal mine graft case.

Judge AHM Ruhul Imran, of Dhaka's Special Judge's Court-2, passed the order after a petition was filed, on her behalf, seeking an adjournment as Khaleda has been sick and was exempted from appearing at the hearing earlier, her lawyer Masud Ahmed Talukder told The Daily Star.

Yesterday, five others accused, including BNP leader Altaf Hossain Chowdhury, now on bail, were present at the hearing. Another accused Md Sirajul Islam has been absconding since the case was filed.

Arsa commander's brother placed on 6-day remand

OUR CORRESPONDENT, COX'S BAZAR

A Cox's Bazar court yesterday placed Mohammad Shah Ali, brother of Ataullah Abu Amar Jununi, commander of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), on a six-day remand in three cases.

The court of Cox's Bazar Senior Judicial Magistrate Sreegaya Tonchongya granted the remand following a hearing on an application, filed by Cox's Bazar's Ukhiya Police Station's sub-inspector Md Noor-e-Alam, seeking a 21-day remand.

The court granted a two-day remand in each case, said court police inspector Chandan Kumar Das.

Shah Ali, now in jail, was arrested from Rohingya camp-6 in Ukhiya of Cox's Bazar on January 16.

43rd BCS preliminary test result published

UNB, DHAKA

The results of 43rd Bangladesh Civil Service preliminary test were published yesterday.

A total of 15,229 candidates qualified for participating in the written examination, said a press release of Bangladesh Public Service Commission.

Details of the results are available at PSC website: www.bpsc.gov.bd.

The results can also be known through text messages by typing PSC(Space)43(space) Registration Number and sending it to 16222.

The preliminary test for the 43rd BCS was held on October 29 this year.

EVALY SCAM

HC cautions celebrities; Tahsan granted bail

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court yesterday cautioned the celebrities involved with controversial e-commerce platform Evaly, saying they must be conscious about their positions.

"Celebrities' responsibility is much higher as general people, particularly from the young generation, throng to invest in companies in which they [celebrities] are involved because of their face-value and names," said the HC bench of Justice Sheikh Md Zakir Hossain and Justice Khizir Hayat, during a hearing of an anticipatory bail petition filed by actor and musician Tahsan Khan, who was accused in a case for his involvement with Evaly.

The HC granted him six weeks' anticipatory bail.

On December 13, another HC bench granted eight weeks' anticipatory bail to actors Rafiath Rashid Mithila and Sabnam Faria in the same case.

Road crash fatalities

FROM PAGE 12

three-wheelers as major reasons behind the rise.

30 PERCENT RISE

At least 5,088 people were killed in 5,472 road crashes in 2021, said police.

The number of deaths and road crashes were 3,918 and 4,198 respectively in 2020, meaning death and crashes rose to 29.86 percent and 30.34 percent last year.

Police collected the statistics on the basis of First Information Report (FIR) and General Dairy (GD), a police official told The Daily Star.

Motorcycles were involved in 1,358 accidents last year, which is 41.46 percent higher than in 2020.

Trucks and covered vans were involved in 1,831 crashes last year – 39.56 percent higher than the previous year.

Buses and minibuses were involved in 1,379 accidents while other vehicles were involved in

3,051 accidents.

Although the police report did not separately mention the involvement of three-wheelers in crashes, many of the "other vehicles" were three-wheelers, the officials said, seeking anonymity.

Prof Moazzem Hossain, former director of Accident Research Institute of Buet, said, "We have raised alarm four-five years ago about the risk related to the rise in the number of bikes and three-wheelers, which has proved to be true now."

The poor public transport system is the reason behind the rise of these vehicles, he said.

The government should take immediate steps to develop public transport system, especially bus services in major cities, he said.

Otherwise, the number of bikes and three-wheelers would rise further which would ultimately cause more crashes, he said.