

At least, turn in a list of money launderers

HC to authorities

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court yesterday expressed disappointment at the authorities' failure to take action against Bangladeshi nationals and organisations who have deposited money with foreign banks, including those in Switzerland.

"We will have to do something for the country and its people. At least, give a list of the names of Bangladeshi nationals and organisations who have deposited money with foreign banks," the HC bench of Justice Md Nazrul Islam Talukder and Justice Md Mostafizur Rahman said.

The court said this after Deputy Attorney General AKM Amin Uddin Manik argued that it is very difficult for government agencies to recover names of Bangladeshi nationals and organisations who have deposited money with foreign banks.

The HC bench was holding a hearing on a writ petition and a suo motu (voluntary) rule involving this issue.

The bench also directed the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU) to submit before it by March 6 the names of Bangladeshi individuals who deposited money in foreign banks, including those in Switzerland.

The Anti-Corruption Commission and the Criminal Investigation Department of police have also been ordered to submit to the HC, within the same period, reports on the progress of investigation into the allegations of money laundering against Bangladeshi nationals whose names were published in the Panama Papers and Paradise Papers.

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The Independent shuts down

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

English daily The Independent ceased all its operations yesterday.

Earlier in April 2020, the paper, owned by Beximco, stopped its print version, Shamim A Zahedi, executive editor of The Independent, told The Daily Star.

"We have stopped all activities of the newspaper as the investors found the newspaper economically not viable anymore."

He also said the authorities have communicated the decision to all its employees and will pay all dues as per the law.

The newspaper was launched in March 26, 1995.

A reporter of the newspaper said the authorities yesterday informed them of the decision and assured of paying all dues.



A small boy riding a bicycle against the traffic on a busy road in the capital's Malibagh. Such an activity could lead to an accident. Traffic rules and safe use of roads should be taught more extensively in elementary schools.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

RISING CASES CAUSED BY OMICRON COUSIN BA.2

Scientists on alert

REUTERS, Chicago

The highly transmissible Omicron variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus - the most common form of which is known as BA.1 - now accounts for nearly all of the coronavirus infections globally, although dramatic surges in Covid cases have already peaked in some countries.

Scientists are now tracking a rise in cases caused by a close cousin known as BA.2, which is starting to outcompete BA.1 in parts of Europe and Asia.

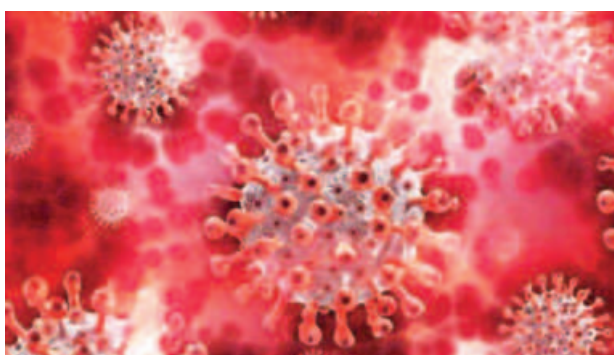
Globally, BA.1 accounted for 98.8% of sequenced cases submitted to the public virus tracking database GISAID as of January 25. But several countries are reporting recent increases in the subvariant known as BA.2, according to the World Health Organization.

In addition to BA.1 and BA.2, the WHO lists two other subvariants under the Omicron umbrella: BA.1.1.529 and BA.3. All are closely related genetically, but each features mutations that could alter how they behave.

Trevor Bedford, a computational virologist at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center who has been tracking the evolution of SARS-CoV-2, wrote on Twitter on Friday that BA.2 represents roughly 82% of cases in Denmark, 9% in the UK and 8% in the United States, based on his analysis of sequencing data from the GISAID database and case counts from the Our World in Data project at the University of Oxford.

The BA.1 version of Omicron has been somewhat easier to track than prior variants. That is because BA.1 is missing one of three target genes used in a common PCR test. Cases showing this pattern were assumed by default to be caused by BA.1.

BA.2, sometimes known as a "stealth" subvariant, does not have the same missing target gene. Instead, scientists are monitoring it the same way they have prior variants,



including Delta, by tracking the number of virus genomes submitted to public databases such as GISAID.

As with other variants, an infection with BA.2 can be detected by coronavirus home tests kits, though they cannot indicate which variant is responsible, experts said.

Some early reports indicate that BA.2 may be even more infectious than the already extremely contagious BA.1, but there is no evidence so far that it is more likely to evade vaccine protection.

Danish health officials estimate that BA.2 may be 1.5 times more transmissible than BA.1, based on preliminary data, though it likely does not cause more severe disease.

In England, a preliminary analysis of contact tracing from December 27, 2021, through January 11, 2022, by the UK Health Security Agency (HSA) suggests that household transmission is higher among contacts of people infected with BA.2 (13.4%) compared with other Omicron cases (10.3%).

The HSA found no evidence of a difference in vaccine effectiveness, according to the January 28 report.

Israeli president on first-ever visit to UAE

AFP, Abu Dhabi

Israel's President Isaac Herzog started his first visit to the United Arab Emirates yesterday, the latest high-profile diplomatic trip since the countries normalised ties.

It follows a visit by Naftali Bennett last month, the first by an Israeli premier, during which both sides are understood to have discussed Iran's nuclear programme, a top Israeli security concern.

Herzog, travelling with the first lady, arrived around 0800 GMT in the UAE capital, where he met with Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, the president's office said.

"Beginning the first visit by an Israeli president in the United Arab Emirates," Herzog tweeted upon arrival. "We were delighted and deeply moved by the warm welcome in Abu Dhabi."

The visit comes some 16 months after the wealthy Gulf country forged diplomatic ties with Israel, becoming the third Arab nation to do so after Egypt and Jordan.

Sinha murder verdict today

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include suspended police sub-inspector Nandadulal Rakshit and suspended constables Shahjahan, Liton Mia, Sagar Deb, Kamal Hossain, Abdullah Al Mamun, Safanur Karim, Rubel Sharma, Md Abdullah, and Md Rajib, and cops' aides Nurul Amin, Nezam Uddin and Ayaz Uddin.

All the accused are in jail. Local police said Inspector Liaquat's team had taken over the checkpoint from three APBn officers before Sinha was fatally shot.

Sinha was shooting videos for his YouTube channel in the village of Marishbunga before he was shot. He had been residing in the area for a month for filming.

The law enforcers claimed that they tried to search Sinha's car but

the former army official aimed his pistol at them, prompting them to shoot in self-defence.

They also claimed that they found drugs in his car. Witnesses, however, gave different accounts of the incident.

They said Sinha got down from his car with his hands over his head and the policemen shot him at point-blank. After the killing, police filed two cases with Teknaf Police Station and one with Ramu Police Station.

Five days after the incident, Sinha's elder sister Sharmin Shahria Ferdous filed a murder case accusing Pradeep, Liaquat and seven others.

On December 13, 2020, five months after the killing of Sinha, investigating officer Senior ASP of Rab-15 Mohammad Khairul Islam submitted the charge sheet.

Back into darkness

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pills known as "yaba".

The home ministry prepared a list of 1,151 yaba traders, and top officials at that time said the government will try to ensure a better life for those who surrendered. If needed, they will be rehabilitated.

Besides, police will seek lesser punishment for them. Around 330 drug traders of the district surrendered to police in different phases at that time.

Like Hoque, two siblings - Jewel Miah, 35, and Sohel Miah, 31 - surrendered to police and promised to leave the illegal narcotics business.

On December 14, this correspondent posing as a buyer called Jewel and ordered some Phensedyl bottles. He said he could arrange them but each bottle would cost Tk 2,400.

But when this correspondent contacted the three drug traffickers disclosing his identity and wanted to know what prompted them to return to narcotics trade again, they hung up the phone and subsequently blocked the number.

Several narcotics cases have been filed against Hoque, Jewel and his brother in the last two years, said police.

Somrat Atik, a resident of the same area and an accused in five narcotics cases, said it was difficult to leave the narcotics business.

Records show around 63 narcotics cases were filed between January and November last year with Bijoyagar police station.

Brahmanbaria recorded around 330 narcotics cases against 605 people during that period.

Locals and social activists said drug peddling

"My house is located in Bijoyagar of the district, which is a narcotics prone area. I got involved in smuggling through local acquaintances," Atik told this newspaper on January 4.

"But now, I want to leave the illegal trade and plan to go and settle in my in-law's home in Cumilla so that I do not get involved in it again," added Atik.

Records show around 63 narcotics cases were filed between January and November last year with Bijoyagar police station.

Brahmanbaria recorded around 330 narcotics cases against 605 people during that period.

Locals and social activists said drug peddling

has increased in the bordering district and many who previously surrendered returned to narcotics business and are making a fortune.

Abu Sayeed, president of Shushashonur Jonno Nagorik (Shujan) of Brahmanbaria, said the initiative did not work in the absence of proper monitoring by law enforcers.

"The authorities also failed to engage these people in any legal profession after they surrendered," said Sayeed.

Law enforcers recovered 35,269 pieces of yaba in 2017. It rose to 58,672 pieces in 2018 and 61,553 pieces in 2019. Although Covid-19 limited the activities for the last two years, 44,575 pieces

of yaba were recovered in 2020, police data shows.

Md Mizanur Rahman, assistant director of the department of narcotics control in Brahmanbaria, told The Daily Star that there were around 520 listed small and big narcotics traders in the district.

"We face difficulties conducting drives as we do not get accurate information about the narcotics traders. But we are working and drives are underway."

He said that they have a list of around a dozen people who allegedly became owners of huge sums of money through narcotics smuggling in Bijoyagar.

"These people were once arrested and some of them also surrendered but again returned to the trade," said Mizanur.

Anisur Rahman, SP of Brahmanbaria, told The Daily Star on January 6 that the surrender programme was an initiative by public representatives to bring narcotics smugglers into normal life.

"We will now collect the list of those who had surrendered but again returned to the dark world. Legal action will be taken against them," he said.

Yaba was made a class-A banned substance in the country in 2018 with parliament passing a law having a provision for death penalty for illegal drug trading.

activated immediately. The government has to spend on transmission control activities. The return will be multiplied," he added.

Meanwhile, the DGHS has said that the isolation period of Covid-19 infected people will be 10 days from the onset of developing symptoms.

Those who have tested positive will stay in isolation for 10 days, said Nazmul Islam, spokesperson of the DGHS, in an online bulletin yesterday.

After 10 days, if there is no symptom, the person can reinjoin work and there will be no need for a second RT-PCR test.

People can take booster shots six weeks after testing positive for Covid-19, he said.

Man 'dies by suicide' in prison

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Jhenidah

A prisoner "died by suicide" hanging from a toilet window in Jhenidah District Jail yesterday.

The dead is Mofij Uddin, 35, of Bagutia village in the district's Shailakupa upazila. He was sentenced to five-year imprisonment in a dowry case.

He had been in the prison since January 21 as a district court sent him to jail.

Contacted, Jailor Rafikul Islam, said Mofij was found hanging from the toilet window around 11:00am.

The prison authorities rushed him to Jhenidah Sadar Hospital where on-duty doctors declared him dead, he added.

Cold wave grips 12 dists

BSS, Dhaka

Mild to moderate cold wave is sweeping over Rangpur and Rajshahi divisions and the districts of Tangail, Gopalganj, Faridpur, Madaripur, Rangamati, Feni, Moulvibazar, Jashore, Kushtia, Chuadanga, Barishal and Bhola and the upazila of Sitakunda and it may continue.

The weather may remain dry with the temporary partly cloudy sky over the country, said a met release issued for 24-hour commencing at 9:00am yesterday.

Moderate to thick fog may occur over the north-western part and river basins and light to moderate fog may occur elsewhere over the country from midnight to morning.

Night and day temperatures may rise slightly over the country.

Madrasa teacher sent to jail over rape

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Thakurgaon

A Panchagarh court yesterday sent a local madrasa teacher to jail for violating two minor students on Saturday night.

The accused is Abu Bakkar Siddique, 24, teacher of Nurani Orphanage and Hafezi Madrasa in the district's Sadar upazila.

The victims' family members filed a case against him with Panchagarh Police Station on Saturday night.

Police arrested the teacher the same night and produced him before the court yesterday.

5th grader dies 17 days after cylinder blast

STAR REPORT

An injured fifth-grader died last night after fighting for life for 17 days at Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery.

He was one of those who suffered burn injuries from an explosion of a helium gas cylinder that injured around 40 people including 35 children.

The victim Sabbir Hossain, 14, of Nangalkot upazila, died around 10:30pm on Saturday night while undergoing treatment at the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of the burn institute, reports our Cumilla correspondent quoting the victim's father.

Sabbir was undergoing treatment at the ICU since January 24, his father said, adding that 14 bags of blood were given to Sabbir but the doctors could not save him.

It's getting grimmer

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Dashboard of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

The intensive care unit bed occupancy rate has doubled to 24 percent from January 1, while the occupancy rate in the High Dependency Unit has increased to 27 percent from 10 percent.

Health experts, too, sounded the alarms. "The real positivity rate is multiple times higher," Benazir Ahmed, public health expert and a member of the National Immunisation Advisory Group, told The Daily Star.

Yesterday, the positivity rate, which was about 2 percent at the turn of the year, was 28.33 percent, down from 31.30 percent

the previous day. On Friday, the DGHS reported the highest ever positivity rate of 33.37 percent.

Nobody can know the reality due to the inadequate number of tests. "This has put the government in a misperception," he added.

There will be no alternative to lockdown in the long run if the positivity rate stays as high, Mushtuq Hussain, consultant of the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research, told The Daily Star.

"We are going to slip into danger if we cannot rein in the transmission now."

Omicron causes milder symptoms in those who have recently been vaccinated with both doses of the Covid-19 vaccine or

got their booster shots.

But about half the population is still unvaccinated, Hussain said.

As of January 27, 35.82 percent of the population have received both the doses of the vaccine and 0.86 percent the booster dose, according to DGHS.

With the view to ramping up the booster campaign that began on December 28 last year, the government has lowered the age limit to 40, Maleque said.

Besides, all children aged 12 and above will be given the vaccines.

"We have expanded the vaccine coverage up to ward level. But many are still not getting jabbed," he said, while urging people to take the vaccine soon.

To step up vaccination, the health ministry has contacted all business and professional organisations to chalk out a special campaign for the unvaccinated, he added.

But health experts feel a lot needs to be done to curb the transmission.

"It is clear that the government is not giving enough attention to containing the virus - there would be nothing serious' type mentality is intensifying the danger," Hussain said.

To stop the upward trend in transmission, the government has imposed 11-point restrictions from January 12, which include wearing masks in public places, limiting mass gatherings and banning all

big social events.

"The government did not do what it meant in the 11-point directives. And the people have also taken the virus spike lightly," said Shafiun Shimul, an associate professor at the Institute of Health Economics in Dhaka University.

For instance, the government did not stop many big events like the Dhaka International Trade Fair - seemingly proving the government's light approach to the Omicron variant.

Shimul suggested stopping all types of mass gatherings including local elections and fairs.

"The local level Covid-19 Control and Prevention committee should be