

43 die of Covid, 8,354 get infected

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At least 43 Covid-19 patients died in 24 hours preceding 8:30am yesterday, the highest single-day death toll since the third wave of the virus hit the country early last month.

This is also the highest single-day fatality from novel coronavirus since September 19 last year. On that day, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) had also reported 43 deaths. At that time, the Delta Covid variant was the most prevalent strain of the virus in the country.

The new Omicron variant spread since January. The daily positivity rate rose to the all-time highest 33.37 percent on January 28, up from only 2.43 percent on January 1.

Yesterday, a total of 8,354 new Covid cases were logged in those 24 hours. The positivity rate was 20.03 percent.

With the latest count, the total number of deaths rose to 28,670 and the total number of confirmed cases went up to 18,79,255.

Of the 43 deceased, 26 were males and 17 females.

Meanwhile, 10,800 Covid patients recovered in the same 24-hour period.

Dozens killed as fighting rages around Yemen city

AFP, Dubai

Dozens of Yemeni pro-government fighters have been killed in a new offensive to take a rebel-held city, loyalist sources said yesterday, following a surge in violence including missile attacks on the United Arab Emirates.

Thirty-two soldiers have died and at least 100 have been wounded in three days of fighting to drive the Iran-backed rebels from Haradh, north of the capital Sanaa and near the Saudi border, the sources said.

Seven Indian soldiers killed in Himalayan avalanche

AFP, New Delhi

Indian army rescuers yesterday recovered the bodies of seven soldiers buried in an avalanche while on patrol along a remote Himalayan frontier contested by China.

The troops were part of a larger deployment in Arunachal Pradesh state and were caught at an altitude of 4,400 metres (14,500 feet) in an area that had seen heavy snowfall in the days before Sunday's avalanche.

Two days of searching in rough weather ended without the rescue team finding any survivors among the missing soldiers.

"Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of everyone involved, all seven have been confirmed deceased," Lieutenant Colonel Harsh Wardhan Pande, an army spokesman, said in a statement.

Hasina gets list

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Sources at the meeting held at the Gono Bhaban, said every presidium member, except Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya, recommended individuals for the posts of chief election commissioner and four election commissioners.

The meeting took place after a search committee sought names from political parties on Sunday. The search committee is tasked with recommending individuals to the president for appointments to the Election Commission.

The six-member search committee, formed by President Abdul Hamid, will recommend new election commissioners by February 24.

At yesterday's meeting, Hasina asked the presidium members to prepare for the 12th national election to be held between November 2023 and January 2024.

"No need to sit idle. We should not wait for the decisions of the other parties over the national election. We must make

preparations from now on," Hasina was quoted as saying by an AL leader who wished not to be named.

She also asked the AL leaders to hold fully-fledged councils at the grassroot-level after the current Covid restrictions are lifted on February 21.

The PM also termed the US sanctions on Rab illogical and added that similar things happen in America, said the sources.

Referring to the Narayanganj City Corporation election, the AL chief said nobody can beat an AL nominee if the local leaders and activists are united. She added that the AL's selection of the nominee was good and thanked everyone involved in that poll.

She said the AL has remarkably changed the country with its more than one-decade rule, reports UNB.

The PM also said her government has been able to keep the wheel of the country's economy moving amid the pandemic.



Workers painting the Central Shaheed Minar in the capital yesterday as the work on cleaning and beautifying the monument is underway ahead of the International Mother Language Day on February 21. The day is observed to commemorate the sacrifice of language martyrs who laid down their lives for getting Bangla recognised as a state language.

PHOTO: STAR

US-BANGLA PARTNERSHIP TALKS

Not a run-of-the-mill dialogue

Set for March 20 in new reality after sanctions on Rab

PORIMOL PALMA

US Bangladesh Partnership Dialogue is going to be held on March 20 under a new reality when the bilateral relations witness strains following the US sanctions on Rab and not inviting Bangladesh in Biden's Democracy Summit.

Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen and US Under-Secretary for Political Affairs Ambassador Victoria Nuland will lead the eighth round of the dialogue, an annual meet that began in 2012. The last meeting was held in 2019.

"The dialogue could not happen in the last two years due to the pandemic. So, we had proposed the dialogue be held soon. The US agreed that the talks be held on March 20," said a foreign ministry official. It will cover overall relationships, including political, security and economic cooperation. As a host, Dhaka will prepare the dialogue agenda, he said.

"As the issue of sanctions on Rab is an important one for us, we will obviously raise it and present a true picture," the official said.

Asked, former foreign secretary Shahidul Haque said it is a big advantage that Dhaka will prepare the agenda. Thus, Dhaka can prioritise its issues.

"However, what remarks Bangladesh officials are making in public are also

being counted in Washington on the sanctions. Our overall approach is very important in dealing with the sanction issue. We also need to do reality check," he told this correspondent.

Diplomatic sources said the US is likely to focus on a free and fair national election next year, improving governance, environment, labour rights, and freedom of speech. Specifically, it will talk about amending certain provisions of the Digital Security Act that has been criticised for stifling dissents and journalists, they added.

Washington will also stress on Bangladesh's cooperation in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy aimed at ensuring free and open Indo-Pacific, they said.

During 2019 dialogue, the US had pledged that it would provide additional security assistance for Bangladesh to increase maritime domain awareness, piracy, and regional security coordination in the Bay of Bengal. Washington also had requested Dhaka to continue the discussion on protection of classified military information shared between the two countries.

In October 2019, Washington also wanted Dhaka to sign two defence agreements -- General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and the Acquisition Cross-Servicing

Agreement (ACSA), which US officials say are "foundational agreements" meant to strengthen defence relationship.

These issues may also come up during the dialogue, diplomatic sources said.

A foreign ministry official said Bangladesh will hold security dialogue with the US on April 6 when they will discuss in detail defence and security issues.

Meanwhile, in a letter to Dhaka on December 1 last year, Washington asked Dhaka to inform in writing the consent to the Leahy Law that governs assistance for security cooperation. But Dhaka sought extension of time twice though it was scheduled to inform Washington by December 31.

Bangladesh has been getting security cooperation from the US pursuant to the Leahy Law, which came into effect in 1998, but the new consent was necessary for the amendments made last year.

Under the law, Dhaka needs to inform Washington about the security agency that will use the US assistance.

Foreign ministry officials said Dhaka and Washington were still discussing the issue.

A diplomatic source said delay in sending the consent by Dhaka means delay and complication in future security assistance.

7-year-old, brother killed in fire

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, CTG

A seven-year-old girl and her 16-year-old brother died in a fire at their house in Saral union of Banshkhali, Chattogram, Monday night.

Firefighters recovered the bodies of Minhaz and Ruhi Moni from the gutted house nearly two hours after the fire broke out around 9:00pm.

Nurul Bashar, in-charge (acting) of Fire Service and Civil Defence in Banshkhali said nobody was injured and the cause of the fire was unknown.

2 more bodies found in Bay

Death toll from Friday's storm now 7

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bagerhat

Coastguards yesterday recovered the bodies of two more men believed to be from any of the fishing boats that sank in the Bay of Bengal on Friday night.

The recovery from near Dublar Char, Bagerhat, takes the confirmed death toll from Friday's storm to seven.

Local fishermen said at least 21 fishing boats sank amid the storm and eight fishermen were still missing.

Coastguards said most of the local fishing boats don't have radio communication.

2 arrested for gang-raping woman

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

Police yesterday arrested two men on charges of raping a woman in Aditmari, Lalmonirhat.

Masud Rana, 26, and Mohammad Ali, 23, both residents of Pabnapara area were arrested after a woman accused them in a case of gang-rape, said Moktarul Islam, officer-in-charge of Aditmari Police Station.

The accused gagged her and forced her to go to a bush near her house and raped her, he added.

Fugitive rapist arrested after 10yrs

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Police in Bagerhat arrested a fugitive convict, who was sentenced to life in prison for raping a third-grader in Chattogram in 2012.

Md Arif Sheikh, 29, was arrested in Morrelganj, said Kazi Md Tareq Aziz, assistant commissioner (Port) of Chattogram Metropolitan Police.

"Arif raped a third-grader in the city and had been on the run," said the AC, adding that a Chattogram court on March 18, 2020, convicted him after a police investigation into the rape case.

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Intention in question

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January 27, responding to a question.

On 100 percent vote cast, he said, "I had previously said that it was abnormal and I am saying it now again."

After publishing the names of winners in gazettes, any aggrieved candidate could have gone to court within 30 days, he said.

"We had nothing to do as no one went to the court," he added.

Echoing his view, Election Commissioner Rafiqul Islam said no returning officer and political parties raised the allegations directly to them. "We do not have the divine power to come to know about election irregularities."

Ignoring objections from many opposition political parties and civil

society members, the EC used the electronic voting machines (EVMs) in six constituencies in the December 30 national election. It also used EVMs later in some by-polls of parliamentary constituencies, city corporations and local government bodies.

The EC in July-August 2017 held dialogues with different political parties and other stakeholders before the 11th national election. During the dialogue, BNP and its allies and some left political parties opposed the idea of using EVMs.

However, the ruling Awami League and four of its allies supported it.

"The Election Commission created controversies by using EVMs in elections. Someone can manipulate it digitally. There are still

doubts about EVMs as they do not have the voter verifiable paper audit trail mechanism [which allows voters to verify that their votes have been cast]," said Badiul.

"Some developed countries are moving away from the system," he added.

Nurul Huda, however, considers EVM as an advanced system with which voters can cast their vote "accurately". He requested the next EC not to abandon the EVM system.

Over the last two years, 42 eminent citizens urged President Abdul Hamid to constitute the Supreme Judicial Council to probe allegations of corruption and misconduct by the EC.

They wrote twice to the president -- on December 14, 2020, and January 17, 2021, in two letters.

In their first letter, they said the current EC indulged in misconduct and irregularities, including in expenditure on "special speakers" for delivering speeches in training programmes ahead of the 11th national election and fifth upazila polls.

The Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) has detected financial anomalies in the EC's expenditure on paying many of its trainers ahead of the last parliamentary polls and upazila parishad polls in March and June 2019.

It has raised audit objections, saying government allowances were given against positions, including that of "special speakers" and "course advisers", although the finance

ministry did not approve the positions for the training programmes, shows a working paper of an EC meeting, held on January 3.

The training sessions were organised by the Electoral Training Institute (ETI) of EC for poll officials.

At the January 27 press briefing, Nurul Huda said the allegations of 42 eminent citizens were "not true" and that audit objections and corruption are two different issues. All audit objections will be settled as per the rules.

On several occasions, Nurul Huda and Election Commissioner Mahbub Talukdar traded barbs in public over electoral and other issues, which many found to be "disgraceful" for a constitutional body like the Election Commission.

Belgium detains 13 suspects in anti-terror operation

AFP, Brussels

More than 100 Belgian police raided multiple addresses around the port city of Antwerp yesterday and detained 13 people suspected of links to a jihadist group.

The operation was launched under the authority of anti-terror magistrates as part of a broader investigation, federal prosecutors said in a statement.

Truck tears

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While peals of mourning hung heavy, the only woman who sat quiet was the one whose loss was the heaviest, the mother, Manu Bala Shil. For the most part, she sat like a stone and spoke to no one.

The bodies were handed over to the family members as per their wish, without postmortem, said Osman Goni, officer-in-charge of Chakria Police Station.

Police found the vehicle that mowed them down in a secluded hilly area in Chakaria and were looking for the driver.

Khaleda given

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Commission in Dhaka has also endorsed the award.

The CHRIO crest says the award was given to Khaleda Zia "in recognition of outstanding contributions and devotion to the protection and advancement of disadvantaged people as well as democracy, human rights, peace and rule of law for Bangladesh and the world beyond".

On February 1, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia, 76, returned home after an 81-day stay in the capital's Evercare Hospital for treatment.

Former prime minister Khaleda has been suffering from multiple diseases, including liver cirrhosis.

Members of a medical board for Khaleda said she needs to go abroad immediately for better treatment.

Khaleda, convicted in two graft cases, was freed temporarily through an executive order by the government on March 25, 2020.