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## COVID RESPONSE FUNDS

# Only 15pc utilised in 2 years

REJAUL KARIM BYRON and MOUDUD AHMED SUJAN

Over the last two years, the government has been able to utilise only around 15 percent of Tk 8,150 crore allocated for two Covid-19 emergency response projects.

The World Bank, Asian Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2020 committed \$800 million (Tk 6,970 crore approximately) to support Bangladesh in testing and treating Covid-19 cases, purchasing vaccine and strengthening its ill-equipped systems for public health emergencies.

The remainder of the cost is borne by the government.

The funds have to be utilised by the end of June 2023, according to the government's annual development plan.

The funds were committed at a time when the country's health sector was in urgent need of medical equipment to contain the pandemic that hit the country in March 2020.

Health experts said the utilisation of funds slowed down amid allegations of corruption in purchasing health equipment and a lack of capacity of health officials in implementing projects.

Besides, the government could not use the funds allocated for purchasing vaccines due to the scarcity of jobs and conditions from financiers for procuring vaccines approved by the World Health Organisation, they added.

The government took up the Covid-19 Emergency Response and Pandemic Preparedness Project worth Tk 6,786 crore to procure, preserve and distribute vaccines and buy necessary health equipment.

The WB committed \$600 million, including \$500 million for procuring vaccines, while the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank financed \$100 million in this project.

However, as of March this year, the government could spend only Tk 830 crore or around 12 percent of the total fund, according to health ministry data.

The government also undertook a similar project titled "Covid-19 Response Emergency Assistance" in April 2020 worth Tk 1,364 crore with \$100 million (Tk 871 crore approx) coming from the ADB.

As of March this year, the government utilised only Tk 408 crore, or less than a third of the amount. The combined utilisation of funds of the two projects is around 15 percent.

The country faced crises in health services when Covid positivity rates spiked, first in August-September 2020 and then during the

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- Govt spent Tk 1,238cr of 2 projects worth Tk 8,150cr
- WB, ADB, AIIB contributed Tk 6,970cr (approx)
- Deadline for implementation is June 30, 2023
- Slow utilisation due to graft allegations, lack of capacity
- Donors' conditions on vaccines created obstacles



Vehicles stuck in a jam on Airport Road near Setu Bhaban in the capital. On several occasions, Dhaka North City Corporation Mayor Atiqul Islam said Setu Bhaban and BRTA Bhaban, built along the busy thoroughfare, narrowed down the road, leading to frequent congestions in the area. The photo was taken around 12:30pm yesterday

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

## CUSTODIAL DEATH Charges framed against 5 cops, another

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

A Sylhet court yesterday framed charges against six people, including five police personnel, in a case filed over the death of Rayhan Ahmed in custody two and a half years ago.

Sylhet District and Sessions

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Rayhan Ahmed

## Dissolution of zila parishads draws flak

### Putting unelected people at helm undermines constitution: experts

RASHIDUL HASAN

The government's decision to dissolve zila parishads has received widespread criticisms with experts saying that the appointment of unelected individuals at the helm of the 130-year-old local government body contradicted the constitution.

It is unfortunate that the government chose to appoint administrators instead of holding zila parishad polls, experts said.

It remains to be seen whether the government picks the administrators from the ruling party or the bureaucracy.

Meanwhile, local Awami League leaders, including the ones who lost their zila parishad chairmanship on Sunday, are now lobbying for administrator posts, AL insiders said yesterday.

On Sunday night, the Local Government Division of the LGRD ministry in circular announced the dissolution of zila parishads of 61 districts. Until the administrators are appointed, as per the newly-amended law, the Chief Executive Officers of the zila parishads will oversee the administrative and financial matters.

With this, the chairmen and members of the zila parishads lost their jobs.

LGRD Minister Tajul Islam in a statement yesterday said the Election Commission could not hold elections to all the union parishads on time due to the pandemic.

"As the union parishad chairmen and mayors and members of the

municipality are the voters in zila parishad polls, the election to the local government body [zila parishads] could not take place."

Amid strong opposition from the BNP and Jatiya Party MPs, the "Zila Parishad (Amendment) Bill" was passed in parliament with a provision to appoint a suitable individual or an official as the administrator after the five-year tenure of the district-level local government body ends.

The administrator will be in office

**We all termed the caretaker government unconstitutional because it had no elected representatives. Having a local government body without an elected representative even for a day is inappropriate.**

until a new administration is formed. However, the term of the administrator will not be over 180 days and an individual can't be the administrator more than once.

The dormant zila parishads were revived through the first zila parishad polls on December 28, 2016.

Amid boycotts by the BNP and the JP, the ruling Awami League-backed candidates became chairmen in 25 districts, AL leaders running as independents won in 13, and AL leaders won unopposed in 21. Polls were held in two other districts later.

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## EC must earn people's trust

### Journos say during talks

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Election Commission should take steps to restore people's trust in it and reform the electronic voting system for holding a free, fair and participatory election, senior journalists said yesterday.

Speaking at a dialogue with the EC, they also suggested that the commission should introduce Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) system with the EVM machine through which a voter would be able to get feedback after having a printed slip. This would help the commission earn the people's confidence.

The VVPAT system gives instant feedback to the voter showing that the vote polled has in fact been allotted against the candidate chosen.

Yesterday, the EC held talks with senior journalists of the electronic media and online news outlets at the conference room of its Sher-e-Bangla Nagar office in the capital.

The commission is now holding dialogues with various professional groups and politicians for recommendations on how to hold free and fair elections.

Masud Kamal, head of news at Bangla Tribune,

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Firefighters work at the site of military strikes on buildings as Russia's attack on Ukraine continues in Lviv yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Russia bombards cities

### Seven Ukrainians killed in Lviv; Luhansk governor urges people to evacuate

AGENCIES

Russia said yesterday it had hit hundreds of military targets in Ukraine overnight, destroying command posts with air-launched missiles, while authorities in the western city of Lviv, which has escaped heavy bombardment, said a missile attack killed seven.

The Russian defence ministry said in a statement it had destroyed 16 Ukrainian military facilities in the Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk regions and in the port of Mykolayiv, in the south and east of the country.

It added that the Russian air force had launched strikes against 108 areas where Ukrainian forces were concentrated and Russian

artillery struck 315 Ukrainian military targets overnight.

Driven back by Ukrainian resistance in the north, the Russian military has refocused its ground offensive in the two eastern provinces known as the Donbas, while launching long-distance strikes at other targets, including the capital, Kyiv.

It is now trying to take full control of the Ukrainian port city of Mariupol, which has been besieged for weeks and which would be a huge strategic prize, linking territory held by pro-Russian separatists in the east with the Crimea region Moscow annexed in 2014.

Ukrainian authorities said missiles struck military facilities

and a car tire service point in Lviv, which is just 60 km from the Polish border. Lviv mayor Andriy Sadoviy said seven people were killed and 11 were wounded. The blast shattered windows of a hotel housing Ukrainians evacuated from elsewhere in the country, he added.

Russia denies targeting civilians and rejects what Ukraine says is evidence of atrocities, saying Ukraine has staged them to undermine peace talks.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said troops in the pulverised port of Mariupol were still fighting on Sunday, despite a Russian demand to surrender.

"The city still has not fallen," he told ABC's This Week programme,

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