



PHOTO: STAR

One more dies from Covid

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh reported one more Covid-linked death and 278 cases in 24 hours till yesterday morning. With the new numbers, the country's total fatalities rose to 29,331 and caseload to 2,014,355, according to the Directorate General of Health Services.

The daily case test positivity rate rose to 8.34 percent from Thursday's 7.40 percent as 3,334 samples were tested. The deceased was a man from Dhaka division.

The mortality rate remained unchanged at 1.46 percent while the recovery rate at 97.22 percent.

In August, the country reported 32 Covid-linked deaths and 6,689 cases.

Bangladesh registered its highest daily caseload of 16,230 on July 28 last year and daily fatalities of 264 on August 10 the same year.

BATTLE ON EASTERN FRONT

Ukraine forces bear down on Russian supply lines

Shelling kills eight, injures 17 in Bakhmut

AGENCIES

Swiftly advancing Ukrainian troops were bearing down on the main railway supplying Russian forces in the east yesterday, after the collapse of a section of Russia's front line caused the most dramatic shift in the war's momentum since its early weeks.

In a video address, President Volodymyr Zelensky said Ukrainian troops had "liberated dozens of settlements" and reclaimed more than 1,000 square km of territory in the east and south in the past week.

Zelensky posted a video in which Ukrainian soldiers said they had captured the eastern town of Balakliia, which lies along a stretch of front stretching south of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city.

The Ukrainian military said it had advanced nearly 50 km through that front after an assault that appeared to take the Russians by surprise.

That would make it by far the fastest advance by either side in the war since Russia was forced to abandon its disastrous assault on the capital Kyiv in March.

Moscow has so far offered no

official response to the reports of the breakthrough on the Kharkiv front.

Ukraine has yet to allow independent journalists into the area to confirm the extent of its advances. But Ukrainian news websites have shown pictures of troops cheering from the top of armoured vehicles as they roar past street signs bearing the names of previously Russian-held towns, and Russian forces surrendering on the side of the road.

Russian attacks on the eastern Ukraine city of Bakhmut killed eight people and left 17 injured, the regional governor said yesterday.

Key suspects get clean chit

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The Daily Star has seen a seven-page report of an intelligence agency detailing the wealth some of them have amassed over the last several years.

According to the report, Billal owns at least two buildings, 70 bighas of land, one brick kiln and four shops in two markets in the district town. He also has two flats in Dhaka's Dhanmondi and Mohammadpur. He could not be reached for comments.

Belayet owns a duplex in Harokandi area, one flat at Moitree Tower, eight shops and 15 decimals of land in the district town. He also owns 47 bighas of land in Faridpur, a microbus and a flat in Dhaka's Mohammadpur, the report said.

Belayet refuted that he made any money illegally. Majnu owns a three-storey building in Faridpur town, four shops, a share in a brickfield and 8.5 bighas of land that he amassed between 2012 and 2019. He could not be contacted for comments.

Jibon has a major share in the seven-storey Ma o Shishu hospital in the district town and two shops in Faridpur New Market. He also has three acres of land beside Bhanga highway, two houses and 45 decimals of land in the town and a flat in Dhaka's Mirpur, according to the intelligence report.

He could not be reached for comments and locals said he went into hiding recently.

The Daily Star visited some of these properties and spoke with dozens of locals, who independently confirmed that they belong to the syndicate members.

Billal Hossain was an assistant of Babar two decades ago. He quickly gained the confidence of Babar, who started controlling the district's tender business after his brother Khandaker Mosharraf became a minister.

Billal went on to become an AL leader of Kotwali thana unit and a member of the syndicate. His involvement with the syndicate came up in the confessional statements of three accused. Documents show that after his arrest, Billal himself confessed to winning three contracts.

He could not be reached for comments. Mizanur Rahman, a member of his office staff, said he does not use a mobile phone at the moment. Nishan also could not be contacted by this newspaper. The Daily Star investigation found

he used to lead attacks against rivals as per the instructions of the syndicate bosses. He also confessed to having received money from some of the bosses.

Siddique was arrested in an extortion case unrelated to the money laundering case in December last year, when he admitted to his involvement with the syndicate, sources said.

After his release on bail about one and a half months back, he told The Daily Star that the allegations against him were not true and that all his assets were declared in his tax file.

None of the six is in jail or under arrest.

THE CASE AND 'CONFESSION'

The CID filed the case with Kafrul Police Station in June 2020 against Faridpur AL leader Sajjad Hossain Barkat and his brother Intiaz Hasan Rubel over laundering Tk 2,000 crore amassed through tender manipulation, drug smuggling, land grabbing and extortion.

Babar, Barkat, Rubel and several other local AL and BCL leaders were arrested in the case.

Barkat, Rubel, Billal, Nishan, Khandakar Nazmul Islam Levi, former president of Faridpur town Jubo League, and Ashiqur Rahman Farhan, general secretary of Faridpur town unit Jubo League, made confessional statements before magistrates.

After about nine months of investigation, the then Investigation Officer Uttam Kumar Biswas, an assistant superintendent of police of CID, submitted the charge sheet against 10 people in March last year.

They are Barkat, Rubel, Babar, Khandaker Mosharraf's former APS AHM Fuad, Levi, Farhan, General Secretary of Faridpur District Swachhshasebak League Fahad bin Wazed alias Fahim, former joint convener of Faridpur town Jubo League Kamrul Hasan David, district Jubo League Joint Convener Mohammad Ali Minar, and Faridpur town Jubo League Joint Convener Tariqul Islam alias Nasim.

In his confessional statement, Barkat told the magistrate that after Khandaker Mosharraf became a minister in 2008, Babar and Siddiqur Rahman Sheikh started controlling tenders of Tepakhola cattle market, C&B Ghat and Faridpur Medical College.

After Mosharraf became minister again in 2014, Fuad, Babar and Billal started controlling tenders of almost

all government offices, Tepakhola cattle market, C&B Ghat and the Medical College Hospital.

"I won contracts of LGED one after another through Babar Chacha (uncle) and Billal. I used to give them 5 to 10 percent cuts," reads the statement.

Barkat disclosed the names of 35 persons including Jibon, Belayet and Majnu as members and associates of the syndicate, led by Siddique.

Billal in his statement admitted to his involvement with the syndicate and said he won three tenders, giving Siddique two percent commission for each.

Rubel's statement was largely identical to those of Barkat and Billal.

According to his claim in the confessional statement, he gave Siddique Tk 1 crore in cuts after he won contracts for the construction of two mosques.

Rubel also said he won several contracts from LGED, and he gave five to seven percent commission to Siddique, Billal, Babar, Majnu, Belayet, and several others.

Levy and Farhan also named Siddique as the leader of the syndicate, which allegedly threatened any potential bidders from participating in the tender.

'INSUFFICIENT' EVIDENCE

While submitting the charge sheet, CID official Uttam Kumar Biswas told the court that a supplementary charge sheet will be placed if any new evidence emerged against any other suspects.

Uttam is now posted in Rab. Since his transfer to the elite force soon after he submitted the charge sheet, CID authorities did not appoint a new investigating officer.

He declined to comment on why he cleared the six.

"We have submitted the charge sheet against 10 people as we found sufficient evidence against them," said former CID chief Mahbubur Rahman.

Asked how they are investigating without an IO, he said CID's Anti-Money Laundering unit was handling it.

Mahbubur, who retired last month, dismissed the allegations that CID officials were bought off to clear some names.

"The CID official who supervised the investigation is an honest officer, and there is no question of taking bribes," he said.

[Our Faridpur Correspondent Suzit Kumar Das contributed to this report]

Bangladesh observing

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at Balmoral Castle, her summer residence in Scotland, in the presence of members of the Royal Family.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has expressed profound shock and grief at the death of the Queen Elizabeth II.

She wrote a letter on Thursday to convey condolence to her UK counterpart Elizabeth Truss MP, read a PMO press release yesterday.

The Bangladesh premier wrote, "I, on behalf of the Government and the people of Bangladesh, and on my behalf, convey to you the most profound shock and grief, and through you, our heartfelt condolences and sympathies to the people of the United Kingdom at the sudden passing away of Her Majesty The Queen Elizabeth The Second.

"Our sincere thoughts and prayers are with the bereaved Royal family members and the mourning people of the United Kingdom as we pray for the eternal peace and salvation of Her Majesty's departed soul."

She mentioned that Her Majesty the Queen was not only the pillar and strength of the 2.5 billion Commonwealth people but also an epitome of grace, dignity, wisdom, and service.

She wrote, "As the most legendary and longest reigning Monarch in the world's contemporary history, Her Majesty set the highest standards of duty, service, and sacrifice and left an unmatched legacy of dedication to her countless people around the world."

'More than a monarch'

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impression on her country and her century."

Russian President Vladimir Putin extended his condolences to King Charles III for the "irreparable loss" of his mother, saying the Queen had "rightfully enjoyed the love and respect of her subjects, as well as authority on the world stage".

President Xi Jinping of China expressed his "sincere sympathies to the British government and people" in a statement released through state media.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, called the Queen "a constant presence in our lives" and said his compatriots would always "remember and cherish Her Majesty's wisdom, compassion, and warmth".

Narendra Modi, the prime minister of India, said she would be remembered as "a stalwart of our

The Bangladesh PM reinforced that Her Majesty will remain a tremendous source of inspiration, courage, and strength for our nationals, who will be recalled with great reverence for her two historic royal visits to the home of the Bengali people.

She said, "The memoirs between Her Majesty and our Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the UK and two Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings in Ottawa and Kingston will remain everlasting. I greatly admire our last personal interactions at the 2018 CHOGM in London."

She mentioned that Her Majesty's most passionate message of felicitation extended to the people of Bangladesh on the Golden Jubilee of our independence - 'We share ties of friendship and affection, which remain the foundation of our partnership and are as important today as fifty years ago.' - shall be carried forward heart to heart over and over again while nourishing the relations between the two Commonwealth Nations.

"With her saddest demise, the people of Bangladesh and I, personally, have not only lost a most trusted friend but also a true guardian," she added.

Sheikh Hasina offered her prayers for bequeathing courage and fortitude to the members of the Royal family and the people of the United Kingdom, the realms, and the Commonwealth to withstand this irreparable loss.

times" who had "personified dignity and decency in public life". Other world leaders offered their sympathies and shared their memories.

Church bells tolled across the UK yesterday and cannon fire rang out across all four corners of the country and beyond as King Charles III and the royal family began observing a mourning period for the queen that will last until seven days after her state funeral, royal officials said.

Ordinary people in Britain and around the globe also paid their own respects to the late queen. In Washington, the US flag was lowered to half-staff to mark the passing of a monarch.

In Berlin, flowers and candles were laid outside the British Embassy, while in Venice "God Save the Queen", the British national anthem, was played outside the Italian city's Festival Buildings.